

Following Feet

E. Charles Vivian



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FOLLOWING FEET



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FOLLOWING FEET

BY

E. CHARLES VIVIAN

AUTHOR OF

"THE SHADOW OF CHRISTINE" "THE WOMAN TEMPTED ME" ETC.

" . . . those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'"
The Hound of Heaven.

LONDON: ANDREW MELROSE
3 YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN

1911

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TO
THE ONE WHO READ IT FIRST

CONTENTS

THE FIRST PHASE

CHAP.	PAGE
I. DE MORTUIS	I
II. A FEW INTRODUCTIONS	14
III. MORE INTRODUCTIONS	27
IV. S.S. <i>MARONNA</i>	42
V. CONCERNING APPARENT TRIFLES	56
VI. A WARNING	70

THE SECOND PHASE

VII. ELMA STEELE EXPLAINS	85
VIII. A STEP FORWARD	98

THE THIRD PHASE

IX. FRIDAY	112
X. SATURDAY	131
XI. THE INNIS PLACE MYSTERY	145
XII. ON THE HEATH	158

THE FOURTH PHASE

XIII. SCANDALOUS AND BURGLARIOUS	169
XIV. AT ELGIN	182
XV. THE LAST ASSIGNATION	193
XVI. WHAT STEELE SAW IN THE FIRE	207
XVII. THE WOMAN WHO WAS LIKE——	217

THE FIFTH PHASE

CHAP.	PAGE
XVIII. AWAKENING	230
XIX. THE BEGINNING OF REPRISAL	240
XX. THE VICAR INTERRUPTS	250
XXI. THREE INTERVIEWS	262
XXII. BEFORE THE ALTAR	272

THE LAST PHASE

XXIII. A DELAREY DECIDES	279
XXIV. THE DREAM BECOMES TRUTH	288
XXV. IN THE STORM	297
THE QUIET END	305

FOLLOWING FEET

THE FIRST PHASE

CHAPTER I

DE MORTUIS

IT is possible to find some slight analogy between the position of Sergeant "Leggy" Harris, on the morning of the fifteenth of June, one year in the first decade of this twentieth century, according to Christian computation: and the solitary horseman with whom G. P. R. James used to open up his half-forgotten romances. The analogy is but slight, for, to the best of my recollection, the solitary horseman always chose a heath and a dark night for his peregrinations, whereas Sergeant Harris "might have been seen wending his way" (I quote from a faulty memory only, and take for granted that the verb "to wend" is applicable to mounted men) on the date above mentioned, along the stubbly grass of the foreshore which divides the rifle ranges from the sea, between Felixstowe and Landguard Fort.

The gallant N.C.O., who had earned his nickname through a habit of glancing admiringly down at his

legs as he rode, formed a unit—and, in his own opinion, a very important unit—in “C” squadron of the glorious Fifth, which squadron was, at the time above specified, engaged in its annual course of musketry on the Landguard ranges. Taking this as the remote or primary reason for the sergeant’s presence in that particular spot at that particular hour, the secondary and more immediate reason manifests itself in a polo pony, the property of a certain bumptious Major Hume, who was at that time in command of “C” squadron of the glorious Fifth. Leggy was engaged in training the polo pony for the bumptious major, that the latter might make use of it without falling off while a game was in progress, and, after a series of bending exercises at the canter, the gallant sergeant—one takes his gallantry for granted without making close inquiries—had chosen the quiet road behind the ranges for a walk in which to cool off the animal, before returning to camp for breakfast.

Three, or perhaps four, causes contributed to put the sergeant in excellent humour that morning. By judiciously bribing the markers in the butts he had, on the preceding day, attained to the proud position of “squadron shot”; on the preceding night he had achieved great success in a flirtation with a pretty nursemaid, who, having tucked her charges away for the night, had stolen out to watch the moon with him, after the custom of pretty nursemaids; and, previously to his setting out that morning, he had tossed for drinks with three fellow-non-coms, separately, and won all three tosses—by means of a dishonest penny which he used, occasion-

ally, in matches of the kind. The fourth and more problematic cause for his good humour lay in the weather, which was such as June in a pleasant mood can, but very seldom does, give.

So there you have him, the solitary horseman up to date, and a fairly average specimen of the cavalry non-commissioned officer. He rode up to within shouting distance of the disappearing gun which marks the townward end of the Landguard coast defences, and then, turning, let the pony take its own time along the semblance of a road between the great earthworks of the "butts" and the beach. The sun hung low over quiet waters—for the day was young, yet—and tiny breakers lapped on the pebbles; a long, slow swell made undulations on the water far out, lacking sufficient force to fling its great, diagonally running rollers on the coast, and the tide was setting in from ebb.

At a point on that road from which neither the town nor the fort is visible, the sergeant reined in sharply and, standing in his stirrups to gain a clearer view, stared seaward. Something white, floating, had arrested his attention, and he stared, carefully, and waiting for each rise of the swell to throw that white thing into prominence, until the bumptious major's polo pony grew restive, and pawed among the pebbles at this unseemly delay, which kept it from its morning feed. Then with a muttered "By God!" the gallant sergeant dismounted, and, finding nothing in sight which admitted of his tying the pony up, he deliberately let it go. It went, first at a walk, then at a trot—it arrived in camp at a flying gallop, with broken

reins and lathered sides, and the bumptious major, seeing it, indulged in much unnecessary and totally useless profanity. As he inquired later, when he knew all the circumstances of the case—"What the devil did an unnecessarily condemned man of his unprintable squadron mean by neglecting his adverbially adjectived pony for the sake of a luridly sulphurous and contradictorily warm and sanguinary cold corpse ? "

Meanwhile Sergeant Leggy Harris, paying no further heed to the pony, sat down on the pebbles, took off his riding-boots and socks, stripped off his jacket, and then, rising, entered the water and swam out to sea for about two hundred yards, where he grasped the cold corpse to which his superior officer subsequently referred with such vigorous emphasis. With some difficulty, Leggy towed the corpse back to the shore, and there, laying it on the pebbles, well out of reach of the waves, he regarded it perplexedly. He knew, from the fact of its floating, that it was a corpse, and therefore any attempt at resuscitation would be useless. He had a drill-book solution for almost every difficulty which met him in the ordinary incidents of his daily life, but even the drill-book, 1904 provisional edition, gave him no hint of what he should do next in a case like this. That edition certainly made a point of recommending the cultivation of initiative among the rank and file, but initiative, having brought the gallant sergeant thus far, suddenly failed him.

The body was that of a girl, apparently between twenty and twenty-five years of age, and attired

in evening dress, though with a high-collared blouse. A thin gold chain suspended a locket from her neck, and, with an idea that the body must eventually come into the hands of the police, Sergeant Harris detached both chain and locket, and put them in his jacket pocket. He had acquaintances among the civilian guardians of the peace, and mistrusted their honesty in matters of the kind—his own intention of restoring the locket honestly was due to an impression that he would gain a reward from the dead girl's relatives greater than he could reap by selling the trinket and relying on its intrinsic value.

Looking at the face of the dead, he divined that life's end had not come easily, here. The widely-opened blue eyes, staring fixedly, with a troubled expression which the waters had failed to eradicate, and for which the manner of the girl's death would not fully account, told of a tragedy in the life, behind this more immediate tragedy on which he had stumbled. He knelt beside the body, shirt-sleeved, dripping wet, but oblivious of these things for the minute.

"Poor thing! Poor, pretty thing!" he said compassionately.

Suddenly he realised that he must *do* something—his sodden clothing chilled him, and brought him back to realities. He pulled on his socks and boots, put on his jacket, and then, after another pause of staring and indecision, initiative reasserted itself within him. He took up the girl's body in his arms, feeling another thrill of pity as he realised how light she was, and set off toward the town.

Near by Felixstowe Beach station a milkman was concluding the delivery of his matutinal doles, and Leggy, with such promptness of decision as the compilers of the drill-book, 1904 provisional edition, would have commended in the warmest terms, commandeered the milkman's cart, placing his burden therein, and replying to that worthy's complaint that the proceeding would "spile my milk" by threatening to "spoil your face" unless all objections were instantly withdrawn. Then, in company with the milkman, who subsided into feebly muttered protests, Leggy drove to the local police station, where he delivered up his self-imposed charge with an account of where and how he had found it, adding his own rank, name, and regimental number, and feeling no end proud of himself. The milkman, too, was made to stay and give his name and address, and I grieve to relate that Leggy, heedless of further and more bitter protests, commandeered the milk cart a second time and drove himself back to camp, rather than suffer the fatigue entailed by walking there. Thus he added a total of over four miles to the morning round of that milkman, who, residing at Walton, wanted to go in an altogether different direction.

With the exception of the fact that he participated in one small incident, which will be recorded in its place, we have no concern in following this modern edition of the solitary horseman, after his final and somewhat strained parting from the milkman. He returned to his duties, unhonoured and unsung, so to speak, and returned, also, to tell of how he swam nearly a mile out to sea—the distance

increased as time went on—to effect that gallant but futile rescue, and of how, for quite half an hour after returning to shore with his burden, he lay beside it on the beach, exhausted and well-nigh unconscious.

Later in that day a Mrs. Wallace, residing at Felixstowe, identified the remains as those of Esther Sanderson, who had been staying with her for the past six months. Later still, Mrs. Wallace wired news of the event to Jack Sanderson, the dead girl's brother—in fact, the only surviving near relative she had possessed—and that night he slept under Mrs. Wallace's roof. Meanwhile the inquest was fixed to take place on the following afternoon.

Here arises necessity for a brief pause in the bald recital of events, for the purpose of sketching in a slight outline of this Jack Sanderson, since he, unlike the up-to-date solitary horseman, is of some importance in the events following on, and in some measure caused by his sister's death. He appears as a tall figure, somewhat bent by a preference for study rather than athletics, with—like his sister—fine blue eyes, and with dark brown hair over a somewhat striking, though by no means handsome, face. In looking at him, the impression was gained that here was a man who would do something to justify his existence, not a mere plodder in ruts, though up to that time he had done nothing—to outward seeming—which would account for the feeling that his appearance and manner roused. In that year of his sister's death he had reached the shadowed side of twenty-nine, and he looked his age.

Of acquaintances he had many—we shall come later to a consideration of them and of the place where he made home—of friends, few, and of relatives, none, now that his sister was dead. His mother had died while he was still a boy, and his father, surviving her by four years, had left to the brother and sister incomes of slightly less than a hundred a year each—sufficient to keep them from starvation without being of such amplitude as would destroy incentive. Jack had developed a taste for chemical and metallurgical research which was constantly leading him into debt, while his sister, after various unsuccessful essays in the direction of teaching, had accepted Mrs. Wallace's invitation, to go and live with her in an undefined position which included companionship and equality. The latter lady was a fragile little thing, living apart from a husband of vicious tastes and irreproachable manners—the two usually go together—and she had been friendly with the Sandersons from the days of her childhood.

From the time when Jack had been a small boy in knickers and Esther a fluffy, toddling mite of two, there had existed between the brother and sister a love worthy of comment in that it passed beyond the bounds of conventional family affection. Centred in his studies, absorbed in them to an extent which excluded, in a great measure, the follies and flirtations usually attendant on adolescence, Jack had always found time to think of, and for, his sister, and one great regret of his had been that her acceptance of Mrs. Wallace's offer had involved their separation. On her side Esther, of a gentle,

clinging disposition, more attuned to mid-Victorian times and ways than to these, had looked up to her brother, admired his cleverness, worshipped him for his patient, consistent interest in her own small concerns, and, up to the time of leaving him, had placed him first among the interests of her life. They had been not only brother and sister, but friends, sure of each other's love, and glad in it.

One records such a love as this as a thing very rare between brothers and sisters. As a rule, there creeps into the family life and companionship of early years a series of discords, caused by the growth of separate interests and aims, and there follow jealousies, petty bickerings making breaches which time widens rather than closes, and the uttering of words which rankle long after the speaker has forgotten them. Here had been none of these things, but rather pride in each other, and, in spite of different tastes, a unity of thought and depth of feeling, rare as desirable. I recall the air of complacent proprietorship with which Sanderson would introduce "my sister," and the equally proud, though shy, way in which Esther used to speak of "my brother," and I realise with some satisfaction that of the dead girl there is naught but good to speak. The winds of years have blown about the grass above her grave; she is dust and half-forgotten, and her little follies and frailties may pass unrecorded, in spite of any result they may have left. For this is not her history, but her brother's.

He sat with Mrs. Wallace on the night before the inquest, listening, and occasionally questioning

while the little lady told of Esther's life with her. There was not much to tell, for it had been a quiet life, and Esther had not been of a communicative disposition. So far as Mrs. Wallace knew, no outside influences had affected the girl. There had, however, been indications of restlessness, and of some vague trouble, even, in the past month—something apparent, but indefinable. . . .

“But you know of no cause?” Sanderson asked.

“None,” she answered unhesitatingly; “and sometimes I thought I was mistaken in imagining that any cause existed, or that there was any trouble. It was so very—shadowy.”

He pondered over it for a time, with downbent head. “We'll say nothing of this, to-morrow,” he suggested.

“Nothing,” his hostess concurred.

“I don't”—he looked up at her suddenly—“I don't want *that* verdict on little Esther.”

“I know,” she answered, with comprehending sympathy.

“And I should like—if there are any letters or papers——”

“You shall have them all, to-night.”

“And I want to see that sergeant who found her.” He rose abruptly. “Mrs. Wallace, you've been awfully good——”

She rose, too, grasped his offered hand, and then, understanding that he wished it, went out and left him alone. She was a tactful little woman.

At the time of the inquest, there reposed in Jack Sanderson's pocket a small bundle of letters and

papers which, since they had no bearing on the matter of his sister's death, were for the inspection of the coroner and jury, if these gentlemen wished to make an inspection. There reposed in a leathern wallet, which Sanderson always carried, one letter in his sister's handwriting—Mrs. Wallace had handed it to him separately, having found it lying, addressed to him, on Esther's table—and the locket and chain which Sergeant Leggy Harris had taken from the body immediately after towing it ashore. Incidentally, Leggy benefited to the extent of two sovereigns—which Sanderson could ill afford—for the restoration of the locket and silence concerning its existence, and, from the minute of receiving the two sovereigns, the gallant sergeant interests us no more.

With the exception of that which has already been recorded, very little transpired at the inquest. The jury, composed of normal and rather stupid-looking representatives of the lower class, as it exists in Felixstowe, listened to the account of the finding of the body, and yawned behind large and somewhat dirty hands—it was a warm, sleepy afternoon, and yawning is contagious—while Mrs. Wallace gave evidence. She knew of no cause, she said, which would account in the slightest degree for any premeditated attempt, on the part of the deceased girl, at taking her own life. Esther had once or twice been troubled with sudden fits of faintness during the past six months, and might have fallen from one of the groynes on the foreshore—she was used to walking along the beach at night, alone. The witness had remarked nothing unusual in

Esther's manner when the latter left the house after dinner of the evening which preceded the finding of the body. Jack Sanderson looked silent thanks at the little lady for the clever way in which she fenced with the coroner's questions and threw out these suggestions with regard to the cause of Esther's death.

Last of all, Sanderson himself was called. Like Mrs. Wallace he knew of no possible cause—his sister's life had been a happy one, save for such unavoidable sorrows as the death of her father, and like events. He offered such letters as the dead girl had left for the inspection of the jury, but, assuring them that no clue would be furnished thereby, requested—and the kindly coroner, acceding to the request, said that he did not think the gentlemen of the jury would derive any material assistance in the formation of their verdict by prying into the personal correspondence of the deceased lady. Beyond identifying the body as that of his sister, and testifying to the absence of any motive for self-destruction, Sanderson gave no evidence of value to the jury.

To Mrs. Wallace, the one person in a position to judge, he gave evidence by his manner of an attitude changed, in so far as his sister's death was concerned, from that of the preceding night. Then, he had appeared broken down by the event, and as one grieving over a great loss; but now he faced the loss, accepted it—as if something of equal, if not of greater moment, occupied his mind, and prevented brooding or absorption in grief. He answered the questions put by the coroner, in

steady, clear tones, quite different from the broken, disconnected way in which he had spoken with Mrs. Wallace the night before, and the little lady noted the change.

The coroner summed up the evidence, and in vague terms directed the jury to return such a verdict as they thought was justified by the slight clues afforded them in the testimony of the various witnesses; the twelve men retired, consulted together, returned. The foreman stated that they found that the deceased Esther Sanderson had met with "death from misadventure," and the inquiry closed.

Two mourners, Jack Sanderson and Mrs. Wallace, followed the coffin to Esther Sanderson's last hostelry, and on that night which followed the funeral Sanderson bade the little lady farewell, and went back to take up the threads of his own life at the point where this tragedy had caused him to lay them down. And, since in the everyday life of a good woman there is little of interest to a casual observer, we, too, may bid farewell to Mrs. Wallace, and follow him.

CHAPTER II

A FEW INTRODUCTIONS

ESTHER SANDERSON'S funeral took place at Felixstowe on the seventeenth of June, and her brother, leaving by the last train for London, arrived there too late to reach his home the same night. Some few small details of business—the procuring of materials for certain experiments which he was conducting, and other things equally trifling—detained him in town beyond noon of the following day, and it was not until late in the afternoon that he reached the station at Brayley, and, passing the ticket collector with a slight nod—for he held a season ticket between Brayley and Liverpool Street—commenced to ascend the hill leading from the station to the High Street. This thoroughfare, the most important in Brayley, was, as are most provincial village streets, dog-, loafer-, and nurse-maid-haunted, and flanked by public and private houses with a sprinkling of shops, the latter being of various degrees of prosperity, and, in an inverse ratio, of pretentiousness. The place merits some brief mention, since in it transpired the greater part of the events herein chronicled.

It is a very old village. Tradition, fairly well

supported by archæological evidence, has it that the Romans threw up the two lines of earthworks surrounding the Castle Hill, and another, but not equally well-grounded legend of the place, tells that Vortigern fortified the summit. There remain unto this day traces, in the shape of stone foundations, of the mighty castle built on the hill by one of Duke William's barons, who rested here securely enough at intervals, between which he harried and burned and slew the simple Saxons of the environing district—as was the custom in those good old times.

In another age the gentle and pious followers of Rome and its doctrines, having tried mild persuasion without avail, roasted a few Protestants here—not for eating purposes, but as a benignant, motherly warning to other recalcitrants. (When a census of the hells is taken, surely the intolerant bigots of all religions will be found in the seventh and hottest.) Finally, and as if to round off the history of the place, Queen Elizabeth slept here. To one who has seen the room and bed at Brayley Hall, it would appear that the virgin queen—this sleep was in her earlier years, before Leicester became favourite—was of a very somnolent disposition, for both room and bed look very uncomfortable. But no place with pretensions to a history is complete without a sleep by Queen Elizabeth—in fact, the distinction is of such frequent occurrence as to possess a significance almost *bourgeois*—and Brayley numbers that sleep among its historical recollections.

At the present day, situated as it is within a

forty-mile radius of London, Brayley has been raised—or lowered, as one may see fit to term it—from the standing of a prosperous agricultural village to that of an eminently select outer suburb of the metropolis. Its total population, in this new order of things, hardly exceeds two thousand, but of these nearly a hundred heads of families are “city men,” season-ticket holders, and magnates in various city concerns, residing in fairly big and for the most part new-looking houses (with water and gas laid on and all modern improvements) which disfigure the otherwise pretty country lanes about the place. These city men form a very respectable little community and give “tone” to the place, while their wives and daughters organise concerts, take stalls at bazaars, act as secretaries for various societies, leagues, and guilds which exist ostensibly for the betterment of the lower class, and play at charity while they circulate scandal concerning each other. In this they merely follow the example set by the great ladies of a higher circle of society, whom they emulate in various other ways as well.

There is also a sprinkling of excessively genteel market-gardeners, who, very prosperous in their businesses, hang on the edge, so to speak, of the circle of city families, and set high value on an introduction to Mrs. Mark Lane or an invitation to tennis from Mrs. Cannon Street. Add to these a sufficient quantity of domestics, menials, and subordinates to minister to the needs of the two foregoing classes, and you have practically all of Brayley. Others in the place there were, of course, and to

them will be accorded more or less casual mention as occasion warrants. And, also of course, everybody in Brayley knew everybody else's business.

Here Jack Sanderson dwelt, for the simple and rather small reasons that his father had dwelt here before him, and that the place sufficed for his needs. At this time he occupied a tiny, thatched, round cottage, which, containing three rooms and a bath—the latter a convenience fitted by himself—was at once cheap, convenient, and quiet, standing as it did down the Westwood Lane, about a mile from the station—the High Street divides the lane from the station road. As, on that eighteenth of June, Sanderson came up the hill from the station in his sober black attire, several members of the "lower class" touched their hats with silent and respectful sympathy, for Brayley knew of his sister's death, and had already discussed and digested the points of the inquest.

He came out into the High Street just in time to encounter Mrs. William Steele, who, driving homeward behind a fine pair of bays, called a halt and beckoned to him. The Steeles were very high up in the social scale of Brayley, and Sanderson's knowledge of them was limited to a nodding acquaintance with the husband, this having existed since, nearly a year before Esther's death, Steele had asked Sanderson's advice with regard to some amalgam of metals in which he was interested. Farther back still, Esther had been slightly associated with Mrs. Steele in the execution of some charitable project, but that was all, and as he went forward to the halted carriage Sanderson felt

somewhat surprised at Mrs. Steele's very open recognition of him.

There looked out on him, as he reached the side of the open carriage, a face of dark, foreign beauty—it was often said of Mrs. Steele in Brayley that all other women looked plain beside her—and Sanderson realised her attractiveness as he grasped the hand she offered to him in an impulsive, un-English, abrupt, yet graceful way. She smiled at him, a smile in which her soft, dark brown eyes had more part than had her mouth, and he wondered yet more.

“I wanted to tell you, Mr. Sanderson—forgive me for stopping you—I wanted to tell you how very sorry we all are for you over this terrible loss.” A slight accenting of the “i’s” in her speech, and the separateness of her words, added to the natural charm of her voice and proved her of other than English stock. Sanderson bowed.

“Thank you, Mrs. Steele,” he answered, sincerely and visibly grateful for her interest.

“I think we all liked Esther—I know I did,” she pursued, “and when I heard of this it seemed a personal loss to me. You see”—again she smiled sympathetically—“I can understand a little of what you must be feeling now.”

“It is a big loss, to me—the greatest I could have had,” he said. He had an impression that she emphasised, in a measure, the very slight acquaintance which had existed between her and his sister, but her sympathy was evidently sincere, and, unexpectedly offered, touched him somewhat. He felt grateful to her in a vague way, without knowing how to express his thanks.

“And I was thinking this morning—I spoke to my husband about it—you will be very lonely now in that little cottage of yours, Mr. Sanderson. Will you come up and see us, sometimes ? ”

The offer surprised him beyond measure. That the very exclusive Steeles should think of inviting him, who never went anywhere because he could not afford to extend hospitality in return——

“It’s awfully good of you, Mrs. Steele——” he said dubiously, and paused.

“But you will come ? ” His hand was resting on the side of the carriage, and she laid her little gloved fingers on it, smiling at him. He wondered at his own hesitancy.

“I shall be pleased to come—more than pleased,” he answered.

“So that you and my husband can talk—it is better for you to talk than to sit alone in that little cottage of yours. Shall we say next Monday, in time for dinner, Mr. Sanderson ? ”

“If you—yes, I shall be very glad to come up on Monday,” he assented. The persistent gaze of her dark eyes confused him, for he was unused, save for what he had learned from his sister, to women and their ways.

“And we—my husband and I—will be glad to see you. Please accept our sincere sympathy, and, till Monday, au revoir.”

He watched the carriage as it went on, for this sudden and unexpected cordiality puzzled him. Then, turning to go on his way homeward, he was aware of a silver-haired, black-silk-clad dame who bowed to him from the pavement, and he went over

to speak with her—not because he wished it, but because he could not avoid it.

“We’re all very sorry to hear this shocking news, Mr. Sanderson,” she greeted him. “It’s so terribly sad to think that poor Esther should come to such an end.”

Sanderson stared at her—the lady was the relict of a lately deceased fire insurance office director who found, at the least, a rest from his wife’s tongue in another world. Since, after her husband’s death, Mrs. Wilson had more time to fill, his gain was others’ loss.

“To what end, Mrs. Wilson ? ” he asked coldly.

“To—er—drowning, wasn’t it ? ” Mrs. Wilson answered, disconcerted by his bluntness.

“Accidental drowning,” he assented, emphasising the first word. “I should be sorry if the cause of death were in any way misrepresented. I may say I should be more than sorry, and so would those who happened to be responsible for the misrepresentation.”

The old lady concealed a transient look of uneasiness with one of sympathy. “I quite understand, Mr. Sanderson—a small place like this so easily makes much of nothing. Brayley is a terrible place for scandal.”

“It is,” he assented coolly, and looking full at her.

“By the way, I didn’t know that you knew the Steeles ? ”

“Well”—the old mischief-maker was fast rousing his anger—“you know now, Mrs. Wilson.”

But Mrs. Wilson was impervious to anything

short of open insult. "Did Mrs. Steele know of the—the accident?" she inquired, with very evident curiosity.

"Mrs. Steele was so good as to offer me her own and her husband's sympathy, and to refrain from commenting on a subject which must be painful to me. Good afternoon, Mrs. Wilson." And, raising his hat, he passed on.

At the corner of Westwood Lane Mrs. and Miss Stacey, on their way to a tennis party, met him. The Staceys were people of some consideration in Brayley, Stacey himself being a solicitor with a large practice in London. Raising his hat, Sanderson realised that there was no escape, and with grim patience resigned himself to the inevitable.

"My dear Mr. Sanderson," the elder lady commenced, "we're really *awfully* sorry for you—I assure you that Brayley people are quite cut up over the news of your sister's death, and we all feel it must have been *very* painful for you, the publicity of an inquest and all that sort of thing, wasn't it? We all thought so much of Esther, too, she was such a *dear* girl—everybody's favourite, and we *all* feel that we've lost a personal friend. It's so terribly sad for you, too, having been so *very* much attached to her—I wish we could *do* something to show our sympathy, but we can't. I'm sure Mary was quite upset when she heard that Esther was dead, weren't you, Mary? We're all very, *very* sorry, Mr. Sanderson."

Understanding that Mrs. Stacey meant well, in spite of the tremendous amount of breath she

wasted in expressing her meaning, Sanderson thanked her for her sympathy, and passed on. This fussy, verbose lady had several kindly actions to her credit in Brayley, and most people forgave her the tedium of her conversation, for the sake of the genuine good nature behind it all.

One more encounter remained for Sanderson before he reached the welcome seclusion of his thatched cottage. Within a hundred yards of his garden gate he met the vicar of Brayley, a friend of the elder Sanderson up to the time of the latter's death. The existence of the vicar, among the follies and foibles of this ultra-respectable and very small-minded village, is a matter worthy of remark, for he was a good man, possessed of broad views and large sympathies, in spite of a certain tactlessness which, apparent from time to time, kept him from winning the full confidence of his parishioners. A tall, white-haired, imposing figure he made as he paused to greet Jack Sanderson, speaking in a nervous, almost jerky manner which characterised his intercourse with the inhabitants of the place.

"Well, my boy," he said, "I'm deeply—really grieved for you. It's a very sad thing, and I feel it to be so."

"Thank you," Jack answered. "It's hard to realise, at first——"

"I know," the kindly old man interrupted; "but that's where nature is merciful—gradual realisation is less painful than sudden and complete understanding. I missed your sister from my Sunday school—I shall miss her more now, I'm afraid."

"I met Mrs. Steele in the High Street"—

Sanderson changed the subject with obvious intent to avoid betraying any emotion which the vicar's last words might have aroused. "I didn't think, till she spoke to me, that the matter would have caused such general interest."

"Mrs. Steele?" the vicar echoed, questioning the name in an odd way.

"Yes," Sanderson answered. "She was driving, and stopped to speak of—of Esther."

"Ah!" The vicar looked as if he would have liked to say more, but refrained from following the subject.

"The—the funeral was yesterday," Sanderson remarked, to fill in the pause.

The vicar turned and looked at the thatched cottage. "I could wish that you were not so much alone now," he said thoughtfully. "It's more than likely that you'll take to brooding."

"I have my work," Sanderson dissented, but somewhat soberly, and essaying a smile which failed.

"But you want personal interests, man—live interests—work never made full life for any one yet. It's not good for a man to live as you live."

"Perhaps not," he concurred listlessly.

"Not perhaps, but a certainty. I know that, except when I call, you never see a soul in that place but the old woman who comes in to cook for you. I don't know what friends you have in London, but it's pretty certain you're not leading a healthy life down here. Go out, sometimes—make friends and interests in the place."

"I'm commencing—next Monday," Sanderson announced.

The vicar started slightly. "With——?" he asked, as if he knew the answer.

"The Steeles," Sanderson completed for him.

"Ah!" Again he seemed to repress a desire to say more.

They faced each other, silent for a minute, and then the vicar moved slightly and held out his hand. "Well, I must be getting on—come up and see me sometimes," he said.

Sanderson thanked him, feeling that he had done nothing but thank people since he entered the High Street that afternoon, and went his way. In his own little sitting-room he looked round at the array of books, the specimens of metals and rock strata on the walls. Esther had used to dust and arrange these things for him—somehow they seemed to have lost their old-time significance and value now. He had been away hardly three days, but this little world to which he had come back was different—an altered little world.

Sitting alone, he suddenly realised his isolation, and understood the truth in the vicar's words. Then he remembered the Steeles—Mrs. Steele, and her strange, arresting smile. He recalled how, eight years before, William Steele had refurnished the big house on the Rockford Road, and had brought home the girl-bride, over twenty years younger than himself. He remembered how Brayley had criticised her, tried hard to refrain from admitting her beauty, carped at her "foreign ways," and had at last and reluctantly given her the title she still retained, that of the most beautiful woman in the district. Somewhere and somehow he had

learned her history : how that she was the daughter of a ruined West Indian planter of French descent—spiteful tongues like that of Mrs. Wilson were not above hinting that the girl's father had practically sold her to Steele in order to mend his own fortune, and from somewhere had come a rumour to the effect that Carib blood flowed in her veins. All these things Sanderson recalled as he sat . . . and the dark, splendid beauty that had looked on him while he stood beside the carriage . . .

Suddenly he bent forward, resting his head on his folded arms on the little table before him.

“Esther—little Esther!” he called, as if she could still hear.

Perhaps she could—who knows ?

While these things passed, Mrs. Wilson, pursuing her way along the High Street in search of fresh quarry, came on her particular friend, Mrs. Brace, who assisted her in circulating and magnifying every rumour of weakness or defect among the inhabitants of Brayley. The latter lady, an unprepossessing creature with an expensive set of furs, which she wore even in the middle of June (not because she was cold, but that people might know she could afford such furs), sat in a smart governess car outside the local chemist's shop, and Mrs. Wilson hailed her with joy.

“My dear,” said Mrs. Wilson, “I've just met young Mr. Sanderson, back from his sister's funeral.”

“Really ?” said Mrs. Brace.

"Yes; and he was most impolite to me—I suppose he's too much upset to remember to be courteous."

"It must have been a bad shock for him," the lady of the furs commented.

"Mrs. Steele stopped to speak to him, too. They had quite an interesting conversation in the street here, judging by appearances."

"Really, my dear!" The lady of the furs opened her eyes widely, with an air of suddenly increased interest.

"Yes, and—do you know, I don't feel quite easy in my mind about Esther Sanderson's death."

"You think——?" Mrs. Brace looked her curiosity.

"I hinted as much to her brother, and he was quite uncivil about it—most rude, in fact."

"But the verdict was death from misadventure," Mrs. Brace pointed out.

"My dear"—Mrs. Wilson bent forward and lowered her voice—"I feel sure from her brother's manner that there was something mysterious about it—something more than we know."

CHAPTER III

MORE INTRODUCTIONS

THE Steeles were looked on as Brayley people, and included in Brayley society—more, they were penalised on every occasion that a subscription list, for charitable or other purposes, went the round in Brayley, and at these times William Steele grieved many Brayley men and exasperated their wives by subscribing, usually, in a way which caused serious depletion of the pockets of those who did not choose to be thought of less account than he was, financially. Admittedly, the Steeles belonged to Brayley, and yet Rockford House, their residence, was located in Rockford, the next village, and a place looked down on by the more exclusive Brayley set. This attitude was consequent on the lower social standing of the people of Rockford, who lived mainly by market-gardening and other local industries, and had few City men among them. The express train to London, which calls at Brayley at 8.59 each morning, does not stop at Rockford—Brayley people are proud of the fact.

Rockford House stands on an eminence at a distance of about a mile and a half from Brayley village, beside the pretty Rockford Road. The

house itself is set back from the road, among gardens of quiet, old-world beauty, with two great cedars and a stately beech tree concealing all but the chimneys from inquisitive passers-by. Fronting the house is a velvety-smooth, irregularly outlined lawn, flanked on the road side by banks of rhododendrons, and on the other side by walks where trimmed laurel shrubs meet overhead, and unexpected turns lead to secluded arbours with comfortable seats therein—and with earwigs to vary the monotony which a chance visitor might otherwise find there. From the lawn, and from the meadow to which one of the paths beside the lawn gives access, it is possible to obtain one of the finest views in the eastern counties, for there stretch away to the north and west twenty miles of undulations, with house-roofs half hidden in groves, yellow cornfields in their season, the rich green of fertile meadow lands, and silver glimmerings from where, six miles away, the red sails of barges show up from the tidal waters of a river—one of two which that view includes. And the towers of many churches, and the slowly moving arms of windmills far away on the encircling hills—these things add charm to a pleasant picture.

The rambling, old, red-brick residence has been Rockford House for more than two centuries, and though it possesses no history—Queen Elizabeth did not sleep there—has a right to its title. Other is it with the greater part of the homes of Brayley people, for in a brief survey of the place one may observe glaring inconsistencies in the naming of residences, follies worthy of the cheapest kind of

suburban locality. A Fairlawn, far from fair and devoid of any lawn ; a Fairview, whose owner and namer must have been either very obtuse or possessed of a sense of ironic humour, since the front of the house looked out on the Brayley brewery and the back commanded a view of the gasworks ; a Rose Cottage—with no roses—and The Nest, this last most appropriately occupied by a young couple who, having been married about six months at the time that I have in mind, cooed at each other in public—and presumably in private—like a pair of turtle-doves at the beginning of the nesting season. These will serve as instances from a multitude of equally unnecessary efforts at nomenclature.

Acquaintance with William Steele—to return from this slight digression—would demonstrate in him the existence of a mind which, enabling him to find some slight cause for amusement in the folly which made his neighbours responsible for the foregoing list, had yet sufficient of kindly human sympathy mixed with its acumen to make his smile a genial one, and at the same time sufficient depth and reflectiveness to make that smile rare. A barefooted north-country boy, forty years before, he had won his own education, hewn out his own path in life, and come, ten years previously to the time in which we are concerned with him, to a partnership in a great mercantile shipping firm. At that point in his career he had bought Rockford House, and thenceforth he spent in the London offices of the firm three days only out of each week, unless exceptional circumstances demanded his presence.

A self-made man, he had used a mirror in the self-making—or he may have been a throw-back to some forgotten gentle ancestry, a gentleman by instinct. One saw in him a man of refinement, with—in his home life—no trace of the mercantile magnate, no aldermanic pomposity, no consciousness of his own merits, but a certain air of quiet strength of character, and tastes which tallied more closely with public school and university training than with the poverty and hard experiences of his early years.

Such was the man who stood on the lawn at Rockford House on the evening in June when Jack Sanderson paid his first visit—in a social sense—to the place. Physically, a tall man, strongly and solidly built without any appearance of corpulence, with keen grey eyes, set deeply in a face grown lined through watching the world for his chance to grasp and hold all that life offered, with clean-shaven chin, somewhat over-prominent, and with silky brown hair thinning slightly with the passing of his prime.

“I’m rather glad my wife met you last week,” he told Sanderson. “I wanted you to come up, and yet—you’ll understand, perhaps—I didn’t care to call.”

“I understand,” Sanderson answered.

“You see”—he moved on away from the house to a walk beside the lawn, and Sanderson fell into step beside him—“I had an idea that—well, that solitude was not good for you just at present, to put it plainly.”

“It’s a rather unexpected kindness, your interest in me,” Sanderson said, in a way which half-

confessed his inability to account for Steele's extension of hospitality to him, the merest of mere acquaintances.

"Perhaps," Steele concurred, "and perhaps I take more interest in my neighbours than most of them imagine. I've found"—he paused to examine the tiny buds of a late-flowering rose tree—"I've found that there's much to be gained by a careful study of others' needs, and, as far as may be, I pursue that study. Not the obvious needs of the class which is always shouting for less work and more beer—from among which I come—but finer wants, such as are never expressed openly. That study will make a hobby for me when I'm too old to work."

"That's a long way ahead," Sanderson commented.

"Maybe, and maybe it is not far off. By the way, though, this invitation is as much Elma's doing as mine, I must confess. I believe she suggested it first."

"That is—Mrs. Steele?" He felt a slight sense of elation as he asked the question.

"Yes. That name may interest you, now I think of it. It's a sort of contraction of her baptismal name—Imelda."

"Never heard the name before," Sanderson confessed.

"Neither had I, until I went to Grenada. There are a dozen or more of them among the French stock of the island, but"—he smiled—"none like mine. It's hardly a pretty name, so we—well, we altered it."

In this vein of quiet intimacy he talked, and made his guest talk, for a few minutes, concealing by frankly confessing his desire to make Sanderson feel at home. The younger man, quiet and apart from the usual run of Brayley people, an unknown quantity rather than one of blatantly advertised merits, attracted him, and he wanted to know what lay beneath the quiet. When it was time to go in, he indicated the way to the long drawing-room of the house, where two windows give glimpses of the view to north and west, and one looks out on the lawn. There, from a couch beside the window giving a view of the lawn, Elma Steele rose up, attired in a wonderful dinner-gown of shining, metallic-looking grey, with a purplish tinge in such of its folds as hung in shadow.

Tall, for a woman, and very graceful, she stood to speak with her guest, and he remembered as he saw her then the rumour that Carib blood flowed in her veins. In that light and in that attire was some influence which brought out the un-English aspect of her. For a minute Sanderson overlooked the other occupants of the room, and saw her only. Seeing her, he knew that here was beauty such as few women own—for a woman is at her best only in her own house—beauty such as could not be defined by any enumeration of separate attributes, but such as formed a whole of physical grace like nothing he had seen, hitherto.

“I am glad to see you, Mr. Sanderson”—again he marked the separateness of her words, and the slight foreign accent which added charm to a voice naturally musical. “Let me introduce you to the

rest of us—or perhaps you know Mr. and Mrs. Burrows ? ”

He did know Mr. and Mrs. Burrows, both of whom were present, and said so. Everybody in Brayley knew them, and they were usually alluded to in their absence as “Mrs. Burrows and her husband,” or “Mrs. Burrows and Burrows.” They were good people in the main, but cranks—cranked on every conceivable subject. They had begun with hygiene, passed along by way of Christian Science, theosophy, Ibsenism, socialism, new theology, and a dozen other minor attractions, to vegetarianism, whereby Mrs. Burrows had acquired a complexion rather reminiscent of a thinly whitewashed, unboiled crab, while Burrows had grown lank and lantern-jawed and serious looking, as if he realised what a terrible thing life was without beefsteaks. This normally and when in repose, for he was a cheery, kindly, clever little man in conversation, and Burrows animated looked quite different from Burrows at rest. Finally, both the Burrowses had become ardent suffragettes, and now Burrows sported the ribbon of the Cause in his buttonhole, while Mrs. Burrows displayed the colours of that same Cause in every ribbon she wore, and avoided making engagements too far ahead because she hoped, soon, to acquire the courage requisite to enable her to hit a policeman in the eye and go to prison.

So, greeting them as acquaintances, Sanderson turned for the only necessary introduction, and met Constance Gray, eldest daughter in a family of poor and distant relatives of William Steele. She was tall as his hostess, almost as dark as his hostess,

and with eyes of equally striking beauty, though her eyes were clear and truthful-looking, while Elma Steele's were, rather, wells of dark mystery, telling nothing of the mind which lit them. And with the eyes the resemblance between the two ceased, for Constance, although at that time she had reached the age of twenty-three, seemed as if she had but just emerged from the awkward stage of girlhood—she looked hardly a developed woman beside Elma's arresting, splendid grace.

This late development, however, was confined entirely to physical attributes, for at twenty-three a poor man's eldest daughter has learned, perforce, such lessons as give her mental equality with the woman of thirty in a more sheltered sphere. In the time in which a girl of equal age reared in affluence would have realised merely that a man named Sanderson had entered the room, Constance had gathered some indication of his character from his face and manner, noted that Elma fascinated him, remembered what Steele had said in her hearing of his sister's death, and credited him with being, possibly, interesting. Yet in spite of this quickness of observation there was depth in her character beyond the average—that quickness was forced on her by circumstance, which ordered that she should commence to earn her own living at seventeen. Such an experience either spoils or makes character, and in her was inherent strength sufficient to prevent spoiling.

These six people went in to dinner, where four of them consumed the ordinary food of civilisation, while Mrs. Burrows nibbled calmly at such delicacies

as nut cutlets, carrot steak, turnip *a la veau*, and banana *souffle*, which had been specially prepared by order of Mrs. Steele to meet the requirements of the case. Burrows followed his wife's example with plainly apparent heroism, and cast a longing eye, from time to time, on flesh or fowl—for the two faddists did not abandon one pet theory and its results when they adopted another, but piled them up, until it was difficult to remember how to speak on any one subject without touching their susceptibilities. Mrs. Burrows talked of the Cause throughout the meal, recounted the deeds of the glorious little army of female pioneers, who laboured to lead the mass of their sisters from the darkness in which they groped to—the phrase is hers, not mine—the Sunlight of Suffrage. Burrows took the part of chorus to her song of praise.

“I assure you, the Cause is advancing—growing,” Mrs. Burrows stated. “No less than forty of Us went to prison last week.”

“Really!” Elma Steele commented, with faintly simulated enthusiasm.

“What for?” Steele asked quietly.

Mrs. Burrows looked at Burrows—she was lost for reasons and arguments without him, and the question was rather disconcerting—almost unsympathetic, she thought.

“As a protest against the laws they have no hand in making,” Burrows explained.

“We are outside the law,” Mrs. Burrows said, in the manner of one making an announcement from a platform to an audience.

"I don't see it—you have the protection of the law," Sanderson put in.

Mrs. Burrows looked at Burrows again, but he had forgotten the answer to this, for the minute. "It's always the way," Mrs. Burrows said, with more than a trace of regret in her voice. "People who are antagonistic to the Movement, or who don't understand it, won't see things in Our light. Why should We obey the laws, since We had no part in making them?"

"Why?" Steele echoed, quietly as ever, and Constance smiled amusedly.

"Why should We be unrepresented in the legislature?" Mrs. Burrows asked again, warming to her subject.

Steele bent forward over the table. "Tell me, Mrs. Burrows," he asked, "why shouldn't you steal, or lie, or cheat your neighbours, or do any of the things commonly called wrong?"

"Because they are wrong," she answered, slightly puzzled by the question.

"Well, law—English law—is built up of a mass of precedents, collected by generations of men for the preservation of right and just dealing between human beings, irrespective of quality or sex. Why should you not obey that law rather than go to prison for breaking any part of it, as you say forty women did last week?"

"Because, as you admit, Mr. Steele, men have made that law, and women have had no part in it."

"But you admit that it is right to obey it, and then you break it?"

Burrows came to the rescue of his distressed

spouse. "As a protest—purely as a protest," he explained, "and to call attention to the injustice under which women suffer."

"You admit that it is wrong to break a law?" Steele persisted.

"Ye—es," Burrows said, very slowly, not knowing whither the admission might lead him.

"Then in breaking it you do evil that good may come, a course of action forbidden by every existing code of morals."

"But that's quite beside the point," Mrs. Burrows said, recovering for a fresh attack, and striving to recall some of the brilliant and hopelessly confusing phrases of a leading militant lady. "You're wandering away from the main questions to mere side-issues, Mr. Steele. Our campaign is planned on these lines, and We follow them."

She was rescued from further reverse by Mrs. Steele, who took the opportunity afforded her by the ensuing pause in the conversation, and led the feminine retreat to the drawing-room. The three men fell into general conversation on uncontroversial subjects for the time that they were left together. Later, they went back to the drawing-room, where Elma Steele made room for one beside her on the couch by the window, and with a gesture invited Sanderson. He accepted the offered seat, after a momentary hesitation for which he could have given no reason.

She talked to him of his sister, led him on to talk of his work, and interested him by her own interest in subjects with which he was conversant—he found that she possessed more than mere physical attract-

iveness. For near on a half-hour she monopolised his attention, and then, seeing that her position as hostess demanded it, left him alone while she went to speak with Burrows. Looking up, Sanderson observed that Steele was regarding him with a smile—a somewhat rare expression on the latter's face—and went over.

"Well," said Steele, "what think you of the suffrage cause?"

"Very little—I've heard it all before," Sanderson answered.

"Don't be intolerant," Steele advised amusedly. "I'm half afraid Mrs. Burrows has made a convert here, though. Connie"—he turned to Constance Gray—"what do you think of the suffrage cause?"

She came up to the two men—she had been standing at a little distance from them. "Very little," she said.

Sanderson laughed outright, and she looked a question at it. Steele pointedly left the explanation to his guest.

"Mr. Steele was afraid Mrs. Burrows had converted you," Sanderson enlightened her.

She smiled. "I think women are not sufficiently advanced," she said.

"You mean — incapable of making laws?" Sanderson asked. Steele moved away.

"I mean that these women—these suffrage women—ask for a power with very little knowledge of its uses and possible abuses—and of its extent," Constance answered.

"Hardly," Sanderson dissented—he found himself taking the opposite side, though with some fear

of appearing hypocritical in so doing—"women like Mrs. Burrows realise the extent and uses of the power."

"Yes"—this girl spoke very gravely, for extreme gravity is an attribute of extreme youth and theoretical knowledge—"but she and her party only represent a hundredth part of the women to whom they would give that power—they are not representative as they claim to be."

"But the rest might learn the use of the power if they had it to use."

"But if they abused it, Mr. Sanderson—supposing these women had their way, and all women had that power while only the hundredth part of them knew its use and extent?"

"Then you suggest——?" he asked, abandoning his point.

"I suggest"—she sat down, and indicated to him a chair beside her—"that instead of attempting to stir the mass and create a possible danger, these women should use the effort they are wasting now, in educating the mass to the standard at which they themselves stand—and higher, to intelligent interest in such questions as suffrage would give them a voice on. Many of the suffragettes lack that."

"They won't need to educate you," he commented, with blunt admiration. "You've thought this out pretty thoroughly."

"But mine is only a point of view," she said, "and that the result of study rather than of experience—I may be wrong, and Mrs. Burrows would tell you without qualification that I am wrong. The question is large, almost hopelessly

large, and I think they have attempted too much."

Thus these two talked on until Mrs. Burrows rose to go, when Burrows expressed a hope that he might have the pleasure of Sanderson's company, for as far as their two ways lay together. Before Sanderson left, Elma Steele came to him for a minute.

"I have been very glad to have you here to-night, Mr. Sanderson," she said, "and I want you to become a regular caller at Rockford House—will you?"

"With—with pleasure," he answered hesitatingly, for without knowing why, he suddenly felt confused and awkward.

"But I mean that you must not stop away for a long time. Come again one afternoon this week—any afternoon you like. Will you promise?"

"Yes," he assented, "but I don't know why you should be so good to me, especially."

She laughed. "There is no vanity in your nature, Mr. Sanderson," she said, "but I have your promise." She bent toward him slightly, still smiling. "I will tell you why—some other time," she ended, lowering her voice that the words might be audible to him only.

Out of the many impressions which the evening gave him, he remembered this incident and one other. That other was Constance Gray's parting handclasp, the steady, clear way in which she returned his gaze—here was a friend worth having, he knew—and her answer to his expressed wish to see her again. "Yes, I shall be pleased to see

you," she said, and from her manner he knew that the sentence was no empty platitude.

He lay awake for a long time that night, trying to understand why—the confusing why of all the evening's events. For years he had attended no social gatherings; his life had been one of partial seclusion, and now, self-distrustful, he queried why Constance Gray should be pleased to see him—why should Elma Steele wish him, a recent acquaintance, to take a place which many of Brayley's prosperous ones would envy? Why Steele—but Steele had almost explained his interest.

Sleeping at last, with his problems all unsolved, he dreamed that Elma Steele stood smiling beside him, a brilliant, confusing smile, and that he sat, forgetful of her beauty, and talked with the grave, thoughtful girl who beside Elma was but a girl—Constance Gray.

CHAPTER IV

S.S. *MARONNA*

ALFRED FERGUSON, captain of, and shareholder in the company which owned the s.s. *Maronna* (2040 tons register, A1 at Lloyd's), sat on one side of a little round table in the saloon bar of that noted free house, the Rising Sun, Commercial Road, E., and on the other side sat Jack Sanderson, the day and time being the Wednesday morning following Sanderson's dinner at Rockford House. Captain Ferguson was most un-nautical in his shore-going attire, sporting as he did a very loosely fitting, ready-made suit of tennis flannels, a soft felt hat, yellow and very highly polished shoes, socks of a colour and pattern which may be termed simply lurid, and left at that, and a tie in which many radiant hues fought for notice with some considerable success. Sanderson found his gaze wandering to that tie whenever he looked up to address the worthy mariner—whose worthiness, like Sergeant Harris's gallantry, one must take for granted without close inquiry.

The worthy mariner, prompt and decisive enough in action on his own bridge, put aside his sea-going manners with his uniform, and came to the

business in hand as deliberately as a cat settling itself on a hearth-rug, or a cannibal building a fire to cook a very skinny missionary. He talked of the weather, of the cricket season, of the depression in business ashore, of the influence which unemployment might have on the next general election, of the state of his own health—each subject involving a drink at Sanderson's expense—and then, in leisurely fashion, he opened up the matter which gave rise to the present interview, punctuating his remarks with draughts from the glass before him. Sanderson ordered the glass to be refilled as occasion demanded.

"It's two years, Mr. Sanderson, since I dry-docked the *Maronna* to get that paint of yours put on. You'll remember my owners were against it all the while, Davis not liking to risk money over a thing in the experimental stage, as you may say. If it hadn't been for me——"

He drank, to allow time for realisation of the stupendous favour he had conferred in granting his patronage, while Sanderson remembered that the Davis to whom he referred had been keenly interested in the experiment, and had with some difficulty overruled Ferguson's objections against the new form of marine paint. Sanderson let the point pass, however.

"Two years," the captain pursued, "and since that time she's not been near a dry dock. I conclude you want a sort of report on the result of your experiment, Mr. Sanderson?"

"That is my reason for asking you to meet me," Sanderson answered. "I considered two years a

sufficient length of time to prove the success or otherwise of my invention, and so watched the shipping lists for the arrival of your boat."

"Eg-sactly," said the captain. "Well, I'll try to tell you, as nearly as I can, what the result is."

He emptied his glass, and expressed his intention of having the same again. Sanderson gave the order necessary for the accomplishment of this intention, and the captain frowned as he mentally arranged his report.

"You'll understand, Mr. Sanderson, that a boat's speed is, in a way, dependent on the time since she was last dry-docked. I mean in this way. As soon as a boat puts out to sea, and especially in tropical waters, she begins to collect barnacles, and various odds and ends of fouling below the water-line, and they keep on accumulating and increasing till they affect her speed. She'll turn out of dock capable of doing ten knots at a certain rate of coal consumption, accordin' to her size and engine power. In six months, or maybe a year, dependin' on the waters she's been in, that ten knots will be reduced to nine and a half, or maybe nine, or even less, with the same rate of coal consumption. That's because these things stickin' to the hull under the water-line—yards of 'em, sometimes—trail along with the boat and make more for the screw to push."

"I knew all that when I compounded my paint," Sanderson commented rather wearily, and wondering how many more drinks would be required in order to bring the circumlocutory captain to the point.

The captain drank. "I thought so," he said, "but I thought I might as well remind you. Yes, I'll have the same again, thanks—it's a warm morning, rather."

The same again was requisitioned at Sanderson's expense, and the captain proceeded with his report.

"We left this Port of London two years ago with your paint on the *Maronna's* hull below the water-line, Mr. Sanderson. I don't know that I need give you all the ports of call since then, need I?"

"Just an outline of the two years is sufficient," Sanderson answered.

The captain drank. "Well, for the first year and a half"—he assumed the expression of one about to dive into a pond on a wintry morning—"rails to Sydney, corn home, mining machinery to the Cape, coolies to Madras, round in ballast to Hakodate, general cargo to Singapore, rubber and cocoanut home, steel joists to the Plate River and maize back—you'll gather that the *Maronna's* spent a considerable time in the tropical waters of all three oceans, and had every chance to foul if she wanted to?"

"The point is admirably clear," Sanderson replied, feeling that they were moving at last toward the subject in hand.

The captain drank, and the same again was obtained. "Now we come to the last trip," he proceeded. "Five months ago we went out from the Tyne with machinery for Trinidad, and went across the Atlantic and through the Bocas to Port of Spain. You don't know that anchorage, perhaps?"

With a fleeting thought that Elma Steele would know it, Sanderson intimated that he did not.

The captain drank. "Soft mud off the coast," he explained, "and the water deepens very slowly—we had to lay off a mile or more from the shore. They took the cargo off into lighters, and through some muddle with the shore people we stuck in that infernal hole for a fortnight. It's blazing hot, and the harbour's sheltered by the island on one side and the Venezuelan coast on the other—water dead still. If a boat'll foul anywhere she'll foul there, and we had a fortnight of it."

"Rather depressing," Sanderson remarked, seeing that his comment was expected.

The captain drank. "Very, I assure you. Yes, I'll have the same again, thanks. We got out at last, and made way down to the Plate, round the Horn, and up to Callao. We took in guano there, and brought it home. Phew! I've got the taste of the stuff in my throat yet."

Presumably to remove that taste, the captain drank again. "Now we come to your paint," he said, "and I've very little to tell you about it. Two years ago the *Maronna* left this port, doing nine knots at her usual rate of coal consumption, and on that same amount of coal she's doing nine knots yet."

"Then——?" Sanderson bent forward over the table, suddenly eager over the success which, as he had known from the day he compounded his paint, must come to him.

The captain drank. "I regard your paint as an absolute and unqualified success, Mr. Sanderson—

yes, I'll have the same again, thanks. I'll persuade Davis into having the boat dry-docked, just to enable you to make an inspection—tell him we grazed a rock and started a plate, rounding the Horn, or something like that. She doesn't really want dry-docking—she's as free of fouling, as far as results tell, as she was when she left here two years ago."

"Thank you, captain." He knew that Davis had agreed willingly enough at the time the paint was put on to dry-docking at the end of two years, and that the latter had been very sceptical as to the boat's running the two years without having her hull scraped and more preservative composition applied. But this point also he let pass.

The captain drank. "You've got a great property in that paint, Mr. Sanderson—boats, bridges, and any other ironwork in salt air or water—they'll be round you like flies round a treacle barrel. If I may say it, sir, I congratulate you."

Again Sanderson thanked him, and again the captain drank. But, to Sanderson's surprise, he declined to partake of the same again.

"I've promised to see some business acquaintances this morning," he explained apologetically, "and they'll probably want me to drink in a regular way, not sip, and I must keep a clear head. I'll let you know as soon as the *Maronna's* laid up and fit for your inspection, sir."

With a glance at the clock behind the bar, and a parting handshake, he went out into the Commercial Road, where a passing cabman, seeing his tie, inquired where the fire had broken out. To

this Ferguson replied with an admonition regarding a pressing necessity, in the interests of the public health, that the cabman should get himself sandpapered and scrubbed. Meanwhile Sanderson, making a mental calculation of the expenditure he had incurred through the captain's "sipping," wondered what bloated millionaire was waiting to defray the cost of the worthy mariner's drinking "in a regular way."

Sanderson went down from London by the "fifty-two," as Brayley men called the only fast train of the afternoon. Choosing a compartment near the engine, he was fortunate in that only two other passengers shared it with him, and these both got out at Wickbury, where the train made its one stop between London and Brayley. Practically, Sanderson was alone for the journey, and he was glad of it, for he wanted to speak with no man, for the time.

Success at last! The captain of the *Maronna* had not said too much in his prophecy regarding the future of the invention—rather had he said too little. Since the clumsy little cargo steamer had slipped down the Thames in the grey of a June dawn, two years before, Sanderson had accepted the fact that he must possess his soul in patience, and must submit his invention to the only test which would place its merits beyond the possibility of question or doubt—that of time and practical use. Since then he had turned his attention to other things, but now, with sight of the place and money which such a thing as this could give him,

endless possibilities opened out. No more debts, no more petty worries. . . .

Esther and he had talked over what they would do if the reality proved equal to his belief in it. In thought he saw her in the little sitting-room of the thatched cottage, her eyes lit with anticipation of the good times in store for her brother, while she planned what they should do at the two years' end. They would travel, and he should buy the books and instruments he wanted, and she would keep house for him until he married ;—with sudden reaction from the elate realisation of his success, he felt that it was empty, useless, for Esther lay under earth at Felixstowe, and he was utterly alone. He bent forward, covering his face with his hands—his two fellow-passengers regarded him curiously.

“ Esther—little Esther ! ” he whispered.

He saw her lying, with troubled, pretty face, as he had last seen her. The child who had grown with him, the girl of whom he had been so proud, the dawn of womanhood he had watched, glad in that no one promise of her earlier years had remained unfulfilled, the way in which she had become everybody's favourite : he recalled these things with steadily growing pain, for all had ended as a candle is blown out—Esther was dead.

The force of early training had been sufficient, in combination with certain inherent qualities, to mould his life on lines of integrity, and nothing had occurred, hitherto, to divert him from those lines ; but beyond that, nothing, and now he realised death—Esther's death—as a terrible finality.

No word could come back to him from the land to which she had gone, no certain knowledge was his that she existed, even, beyond the dividing line, or that when his turn came for passing to the shadowland he would find her again. That which lay under earth at Felixstowe might be all, for aught he knew, and the sister whom he had loved might be dead in the last sense of the word. Acquaintance with the travesty of spiritual life, the pandering to social intercourse, the compromise with commercialism, and tendency to assert man's equality, by virtue of evolution, with the power which created him—attitudes which have destroyed all life in modern religious effort—had taken from him all credence in the beliefs on which his morality was founded. In common with multitudes of others, he had taken the finite instrument of human understanding, and with it had weighed and measured and tabulated infinite God, dissected and analysed infinite Christ, and the resulting data had robbed him of all faith in things unseen. Esther unseen was Esther non-existent, unless one could prove her existence, and he himself had lost his life's greatest interest, had nothing left but work for the work's own sake.

The reaction was complete, absolute. His invention was certain of success, could he bring it before the world—but how could he, a poor man, accomplish that? The men who might aid him, whose wealth might float this child of his brain on a tide setting in toward fortune, heard stories every day of inventions equal in merit with his own, waiting their capital—he was but one among a host, he

knew, and this apparent success was nothing, since he stood as far as ever from the reality.

So, tired and dispirited, like one who has learned of failure rather than of success, he sat brooding and looking out from the carriage window while the last miles of his journey came and passed. So he came to Brayley station, ascended the hill, and turned up the High Street toward the entrance to Westwood Lane. Here, where the street narrows, he saw Steele, who, standing on the far side of the road from that on which Sanderson walked, was conversing with young Jackson, a supercilious bounder whom everybody recognised for the sake of his father, and whom nobody liked. Jackson stood almost facing the direction from which Sanderson came, with the reins of a fine mare, which he had been riding, slung carelessly over his arm, and with his feet planted wide apart—an attitude expressive of his inalienable right to that portion of the earth on which he stood, and to much more beside it. This much Sanderson observed as he walked.

There came a huge motor car down the slight incline of the street, travelling toward Rockford, and the driver blew an awesome blast from his hooter as the car came into view. Jackson's mare swung round with pricked-up ears, to face the source of the noise, and Steele, cannoning against her flank as he stepped toward the pavement, was flung out into the road, down before the wheels of the approaching car. The driver flung on his brakes, reversed—but the distance was too short, and the slight descent of the road aided in driving the skidding dead weight of the car on to the fallen man.

Sanderson stepped out and grasped Steele's coat-collar, dragging him aside with so little time to spare that a stick, on which Steele had retained his grasp unconsciously, was snapped by the car's fore-wheel. So quickly did the elements of a tragedy gather and disperse that, before any of those who witnessed the occurrence had time to think, Steele sat on the pavement, dazed but unhurt, and the driver of the motor was walking toward him. Sanderson assisted him to his feet.

"Hurt, Mr. Steele?" he asked.

Realisation came to Steele. "I've not made an inventory of myself since this thing started, but I think not, except for this," and he displayed a gravel-torn hand. "But who——?" he looked round confusedly.

The driver of the car came up. "Cool pluck on your part, sir," he said to Sanderson. "I did my best to pull up, but the gradient was against me, and the whole affair was too unexpected."

Steele turned to Sanderson quickly. "Then you—I believe you are responsible for saving my life?" he asked.

"Just a matter of luck," Sanderson answered carelessly. "I happened to be on the spot, that's all."

"I can hardly look on it in that light. I won't try to thank you now, but——"

"Excuse me, but you had better get those cuts attended to," Sanderson interrupted, to cut short any expression of gratitude on Steele's part. "I suggest that you get these people to drive you home, as they're going your way. They'll land

you there in five minutes, and I'll—well, I'll come along some other time."

He laughed at Steele's look, and the latter smiled, though in a somewhat bewildered way—the whole series of events had moved rather rapidly, and, after being half stunned by his fall, Steele could not quite adjust things in his mind. "I'm sure we should be very pleased to take you home," the driver of the car said.

"Then"—Sanderson grasped Steele's arm and led him unresisting toward the car—"we'll get along and escape these specimens of inhuman curiosity," nodding toward the inevitable idlers who had gathered round the car and Jackson's mare. He waited while Steele entered the car. "See you later," he said, and turned away quickly to avoid any further words of thanks.

"There goes my last chance!" he told himself, rather bitterly, as the car went off. He had thought of approaching Steele with reference to the financing of his invention, but he felt that to do so now would look like demanding payment for the service he had just rendered, since, after this incident, a man like Steele would not dream of refusing such a request. The day's success was nothing but dead sea fruit, the elation with which he had listened to Captain Ferguson's recital was replaced by a blank sense of life's aimlessness, and he went on his way home wearily, and very slowly.

Then, as if the day had not been sufficiently crowded with incidents and emotions, he met Constance Gray. She came cycling up the lane

toward him, and, seeing that he stopped at her approach, alighted from her machine beside him and shook hands. "You look tired, Mr. Sanderson," she remarked critically.

"I was, up to a minute ago," he answered. Sight of her and memory of his last talk with her restored him to a saner outlook, and her smile was heartening. She did not question the tense of his answer.

"London is tiring, in summer—that is, from my slight experience of it," she commented.

It was a statement of the obvious, but he saw that she was waiting to know why he had stopped her.

"I judge you wonder why we're standing here, instead of going on our respective ways," he suggested.

"I do," she answered.

"Well"—the twinkle in his eyes betrayed the fact that a considerable amount of boyishness remained in him—"to tell you the truth, I don't know."

She laughed. "That settles it, then," she said, and turned the pedal of her bicycle preparatory to mounting.

"No—wait a bit," Sanderson urged; "there's time to give one reason before you go."

"Well?" She paused with her foot on the pedal, still smiling.

"I was—very tired," he said, with a trace of earnestness, "until I met you."

Without answering she went on and left him, but he saw that the smile remained on her face.

Meanwhile Mrs. Wilson, whose guardian angel usually provided her with a centre seat in the front row of stalls, so to speak, when any noteworthy incident took place in Brayley, had happened to be passing at the time of Steele's accident, and had witnessed the whole scene. Through her Mrs. Brace learned the news, in course of time.

"But, my dear," Mrs. Wilson concluded, "though I don't like to say it, or to think ill of my neighbours, I could tell by Mr. Steele's manner——"

"You don't mean to say——?" Mrs. Brace asked, with delighted anticipation.

Mrs. Wilson shook her head mournfully. "I'm afraid Mr. Steele had been taking more than was good for him," she answered, "or he would have got out of the way of that horse. Besides, he seemed quite dazed afterwards, though he wasn't hurt a bit, and young Sanderson actually had to lead him to the motor car."

"Never!" Mrs. Brace exclaimed gleefully.

And in course of time Brayley gossips acquired and disseminated the information that Mr. Steele habitually took too much to drink.

CHAPTER V

CONCERNING APPARENT TRIFLES

SANDERSON went up to Rockford House in the afternoon of the day following that of his interview with the captain of the *Maronna*, and was received by Constance Gray, who informed him that Steele was in London for the day, while Mrs. Steele would probably return home from Brayley, where she had gone on some small errand, in an hour or less—had he been ten minutes earlier, he must have met her on the road. In the meantime, he must stay until she returned.

“I had strict orders from Elma to make you stay if you called in her absence,” Constance explained. “You are not to be allowed to go under any pretext, until she has seen you.”

“Then I resign myself to the inevitable,” Sanderson answered. “How is Mr. Steele, after yesterday?”

Constance looked grave. “Considerably more shaken than he will admit, I think. There were only a few scratches on his hands, such as an ordinary fall would cause, but—there was some talk of heart trouble when I was here a year ago. He’s seeing a specialist in London to-day.”

Sanderson looked his concern at the news. "Of course," Constance pursued, "you take the position of hero here—Mr. Steele cannot speak too highly of what you did. By the way"—she smiled slightly—"you told me nothing of this when we met last night."

"Do you see any reason why I should?" he asked, smiling in turn. "I knew you would learn soon, and—well, one does not advertise a thing like that, if one is in my position with regard to it."

"I suppose not," she concurred, regarding him abstractedly; "but it would have made a better excuse for stopping me than the one you gave."

"Neither better nor more true," he dissented, returning her gaze steadily. "I gave the chief reason."

"Have you seen to-day's local paper?" She changed the subject abruptly.

"No," he answered. "Why—did they——?"

"It appears that their district representative was making his weekly visit to Brayley yesterday evening, late enough to include this. They've made nearly half a column out of it, and headed it as a "Gallant Rescue by a Brayley Resident."

Sanderson laughed. "What rot!" he said.

"It was, though," Constance insisted, "and that part of the description is quite accurate. But they say that the mare kicked Mr. Steele, who is doing as well as can be expected, and they've given the impression that old Mr. Jackson was there instead of his son. And"—her eyes betrayed

her amusement—"they've put you down as Henderson, not Sanderson."

"Well, that's one blessing," he commented. "I'm not aching for notoriety."

"I'm sorry," she said, in a meditative way, which indicated that she was not.

"Sorry?" he echoed. "Why—over the alteration in the name?"

"I wrote to the paper to-day, asking them to alter their facts and give your correct name in next week's issue."

"You?" he queried, amazed.

"Yes, I—why not?" and she laughed, though Sanderson noted a slight access of colour in her cheeks and a trace of defiance of criticism in the question. "I knew you wouldn't do it."

"Well, I'm——" He paused, only half inclined to laugh over it.

"The letter has already been posted, and I decline to apologise," Constance pursued, recovering her self-possession and enjoying his evident surprise at her action. "That reminds me, though—I ought to have apologised before for receiving you in this dusty state. I've been locating a puncture in my bicycle tyre."

"I don't see any need for apology." He glanced from her face to her neat, cool-looking attire. "Let me offer my services in locating that puncture."

"I've found it, and you're too late," she answered, smiling.

"Maybe. You've found it, but have you patched it?"

She looked at him, and tried to repress a laugh. "No," she confessed.

He rose at once. "Where's the tyre?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Sanderson, I'm not going to let you soil your hands and clothes over it. I can manage it quite well myself—I'm used to patching them."

Sanderson regarded her intently—the half-laughing, half-serious way in which she voiced her energetic refusal impressed him with the desirability of asserting his will as stronger than hers, and patching the tyre. "If you don't let me patch it, I'll bolt," he said. "Where's the tyre?"

She looked at him again, smiling, and shook her head. He moved toward the door.

"I'll come up again some other afternoon," he said. "For the present——"

"No"—she surrendered, seeing that he meant going—"I give in—it's in the kitchen. I'll show you."

She led the way to the big, brick-floored kitchen, where her bicycle stood, upside down, with a deflated inner tube hanging from its front wheel.

"But I don't like obstinate men," she remarked.

Sanderson dropped the tube, which he had commenced to examine, and made for the door by which he had entered. But Constance reached it first, and barred his way.

"Please, Mr. Sanderson, do mend my tyre," she pleaded, laughing mischievously. "I think I do like obstinate men, rather, if they're not too obstinate. I capitulate, absolutely."

He went back, and found a pin sticking in the tube. Constance seated herself on the edge of a table to watch operations. "What's this doing here?" he queried, holding up the pin.

"I put it there to mark the puncture," she answered.

He busied himself over rubbing solution on the tyre and on a patch. "There are no more punctures—only that one," she said, as he waited for the solution to dry. "I've tried the tube in water."

"You seem to know all about this sort of thing," he commented.

"I have to know—I have only myself to depend on for attending to them, when I am at home. It was different once—I had a brother——" She checked herself abruptly.

Sanderson looked his sympathy. "I understand," he said; "I had a sister once."

"But I didn't mean to compare my loss with yours—my brother may come back some day. And you——"

"She will never come back." He affixed the patch carefully.

"But you'll go to her," Constance said gently. "You know that you'll go to her, after——"

He turned and faced her, holding the tyre. "I don't know," he said, with almost harsh emphasis. "I don't know."

She looked at him seriously. "You mean that you don't believe it?" she asked.

"No," he answered, with a note of absolute finality in the word. "Do you—believe?"

"It's not merely that I believe, but that I know,"

she answered, with a quiet certainty which equalled his own.

He turned and occupied himself in replacing the patched tube. "I wish I could!" he remarked.

"It will come to you, perhaps through this loss," Constance said. "No sane and intelligent man can fail to realise such an absolute fact as that for any length of time."

He went on with the tyre, and made no answer—save that his silence expressed dissent.

"That machine has to carry me thirty miles next week," Constance remarked, after a pause, evidently desiring to open up a safer and less controversial subject.

"All in one journey?" Sanderson asked.

"Yes—I'm going home on Tuesday," she answered. "To—near Colchester."

"But why not go by train, instead of fagging on these hilly roads?" he suggested. "The rail journey is fairly direct."

She made no answer, and he ceased his work to look round at her silence. She swung her feet as she sat on the table edge, and returned his look defiantly.

"Because we're poor, and I'm too proud to invent other excuses," she explained, in a dogged way. "I want to save the rail fare."

He smiled. "Don't get conceited over the distinction," he advised. "You'd travel far to find a more hard-up individual than I am, at present."

"You don't look it," she remarked critically.

"Neither do you, for that matter," he retorted

cheerfully ; “ but an inventor is always a poor man.”

“ I didn’t know you were an inventor even— behold my ignorance ! But, then you don’t look like an inventor. What have you invented ? ”

Sanderson detected a note of slight irony in her words, and returned to his work on the tyre. “ Paint,” he answered, with laconic carelessness.

She laughed. “ It sounds funny,” she explained.

“ Marine paint.” He supplemented his first bald announcement in a way which indicated that her amusement nettled him. “ A sort which will do away with the necessity for constantly repainting iron or steel which comes in contact with salt water.”

“ But—will it ? ” she asked, as if finding room for doubt in his statement.

“ It’s had a two years’ trial on a boat travelling all over the world. Why are you so sceptical ? ”

“ Because you’ve invented a thing like that and yet you say that you’re poor.”

He smiled as he adjusted the tube inside the cover. Once, he too had thought that success lay in the invention alone.

“ I am poor,” he insisted. “ The invention of a thing is not all—it needs capital to put the thing on the market, and bring it to the notice of the right people. I haven’t got that capital, and see no means of getting it.”

He finished adjusting the tyre and commenced to pump it. Constance got down from the table edge.

“ There’s Elma—driving in at the gate, and you’re caught ! ” she announced.

Sanderson dropped the bicycle pump and turned toward her again. “ I don’t mind being caught,” he said, “ but—Miss Gray—promise me you’ll say nothing to Steele of what I’ve been telling you ? ”

“ Of what ? ” she queried. “ We’ve talked of so many things.”

“ About my paint.”

“ But why—why may I not tell him ? ”

“ No ”—she was moving toward the door, but Sanderson caught her hand and held it, ignoring the dust and solution stains on his own—“ never mine why—I want you to promise, please ? ”

“ I promise, then,” she said, smiling, and withdrawing her hand. “ As a reward for patching my tyre—I won’t tell Mr. Steele a single word of it.”

“ Constance ! ” They heard Elma calling. “ Connie—where are you ? ”

“ Here—in the kitchen,” Constance called in answer.

“ I propose that you wash your hands in the sink,” she remarked to Sanderson. “ I’ll get you a nail-brush, if you’ll wait a minute.”

“ Still at that bicycle, Connie ? ” Elma said, from beyond the door. “ It’s nearly — Mr. Sanderson ! ”

She halted in the doorway with a little gesture of surprise, and, standing framed, as it were, with the gloom of the passage for a background, made as fair a picture as any Sanderson had seen.

"I have the honour to report that the bicycle is in good running order again," he announced, bowing gravely.

"How could you let him, Connie?" Elma asked, with half-amused reproach.

"It's his own fault," Constance answered. "I mentioned casually that the tyre had a puncture, and he threatened not to stay if I didn't let him patch it, so I simply had no choice. Now I'm off to get him a nail-brush—we have decided that he is to wash his hands at the sink."

"I have no wish to question the decision," Sanderson interpolated, "but it's yours, not ours."

"The point is too trifling for discussion," Constance answered, and left the room as Elma stepped forward.

"I've enjoyed myself," Sanderson explained, as if to justify his somewhat unconventional position. "I rather like patching tyres, and there's a sense of satisfaction in making oneself useful."

Elma Steele paused by the table edge where Constance had sat, and regarded him steadily. With the girl, he had felt no trace of restraint, but the presence of the woman made him suddenly self-conscious, nervous—a new feeling, strange to him . . . something about this woman had impressed him each time that he had spoken with her, and the inexplicable sense grew, rather than lessened. It seemed to him that her look hinted at something which she waited a chance to express—beyond that he could not have explained the way in which her attitude affected him, nor could he account for his own feeling in any way. He could

realise the existence of a subtle, undefined influence, and no more.

"I want you to tell me"—she was still gazing at him in a curiously intent way—"if there is anything we can do for you in return for yesterday, Mr. Sanderson. You see"—she smiled slightly—"words are hardly adequate, and nothing my husband could say would express what he feels."

He noted, with sufficient perception of the fact to wonder at it, that she made no mention of her own feeling with regard to the matter.

"There's nothing," he said, "and it was very little that I did, Mrs. Steele—only that I had the chance. Honestly, I don't wish it regarded as anything exceptional."

"He will never forget it, nor you for it, I know. Nor"—she paused on the word—"shall I."

She turned away abruptly as Constance returned. "I'll go and tell them to get tea on the lawn," she said, moving toward the door, and the sentence struck Sanderson as uttered in a different tone from that in which she had spoken when alone with him. He took the nail-brush, and, later, followed Constance out on to the lawn, where Elma pointed him to a chair beside her.

"This is for you," she said, "and that other one for Connie. You shall be placed between two fires."

"I should hardly apply that term," he remarked, as he sat down.

She laughed. "He is obdurate," she said to Constance. "He persists in saying that he did

nothing, yesterday. What shall we do with him, Connie ? ”

“ Refuse him the patching of the next bicycle tyre puncture,” Constance suggested indifferently. “ I know of no apparently greater punishment for him.”

“ I had an awful time in Brayley, or I would have been here in time to prevent him from patching yours. I met Mrs. Wilson—do you know Mrs. Wilson, Mr. Sanderson ? ”

“ I have that honour, and regard it as doubtful,” he answered.

“ She caught me in the High Street—I think she lives in the High Street, watching her neighbours—and subjected me to a catechism which lasted nearly half an hour—about you, about my husband, and Constance, and myself, and I know she will go round and tell people all sorts of things that I did not say.”

“ She lives on scandal,” Sanderson commented, “ and most people take her statements for what they are worth—not all, though.” For he remembered one or two occasions on which Mrs. Wilson had made serious mischief.

The tea arrived, and Elma busied herself over pouring out. “ One lump, or two ? ” she asked Sanderson.

“ Two, please, and no milk,” he answered.

“ You will find ”—she turned to look full at him—“ that you will never need to tell me that again. There are some—friends—for whom I always remember—even little trifles like this.”

“ I appreciate the honour,” he answered gravely,

glancing at Constance. She appeared not to have heard.

"Whom should we count a close friend, if not you?" Elma said, with a half-return of the tone of marked intimacy which had characterised her conversation when alone with him.

"Because of an accident—you persist in exaggerating what I did."

"I speak for my husband in his absence. Connie, this milk looks disagreeable—will you——?"

"I'll go and get some more," she answered, rising.

As Constance entered the house, Elma laid her hand on Sanderson's arm. "I have been glad, since yesterday, that it was you, and not anybody else who saved him," she said, "because now I may tell you that I want to regard you as a friend, as—somebody—as first of my friends."

He knew that few English women would have uttered such a sentence, but then, he could not regard her as an English woman. Again he noted that she made no mention of Steele, or of what he had said.

"I'll try to deserve the honour," he answered.

"And you will let us do nothing for you—you will let me do nothing in return—but I want you to come here often—to know that you are always welcome, and regard this place as a second home, after yesterday. I know your own home must be very lonely, and your sister's death——"

Was there a second meaning in the words, he wondered? And what lay behind this sudden change in her manner when alone with him? He

tried to puzzle out the answers to these questions, but, with her hand resting on his arm, the effort was a failure. It was a position in which clear reflection seemed impossible.

"I'm amply repaid for what I did," he said.

"But you will do as I ask?" she urged. "Tell me—promise!"

"I—promise," he answered slowly.

She withdrew her hand from his arm as Constance appeared in the doorway of the house. "Connie goes home next week," she remarked, and a note of satisfaction in her voice irritated Sanderson vaguely.

"I know," he said. "She told me this afternoon."

"Connie"—as the latter seated herself—"how many secrets have you told Mr. Sanderson this afternoon?"

"None," Constance answered promptly; "but I heard one."

Looking at his hostess, Sanderson observed how her brows drew down into a tiny frown as she leaned back in her chair, and how the frown cleared gradually, giving place to a smile of contentment, almost of complacency. He wondered over the sequence of expressions, at the time.

There came a day long afterward when he remembered the apparently trifling conversation of that afternoon, and, with later events for guides, understood that every sentence, even every word that was spoken, had its use for Elma Steele. When that day came he remembered her quickly passing frown, and understood that its passing

and the smile which followed it were caused by a knowledge of her own beauty and the power of beauty—she smiled because she knew that with the aid of her beauty she could win any one thing she might desire.

That day of understanding came too late to save him altogether. When it came, he understood that hers was the knowledge of a truth.

CHAPTER VI

A WARNING

TOWARD the end of the week in which Sanderson paid his second visit to Rockford House, Steele returned that visit. He came to the thatched cottage just after sunset, and Sanderson, receiving him in the sitting-room, cleared books off a chair to find a seat for him—Jack was not a tidy mortal.

“Now, Mr. Steele,” he said, having accomplished this preliminary act of hospitality, and invited his guest to be seated, “it’s a rather superfluous question, for I’ve little beside whisky in the place, but what can I offer you ? ”

“Paint,” Steele answered, smiling.

Sanderson sat down and stared—then he frowned.

“Miss Gray promised me——” he said, and stopped.

“And I can assure you that her promise has been kept, whatever it is,” Steele said quietly. “Connie is not the sort of girl who breaks her word.”

“She promised me she’d tell you nothing about this paint.”

“Neither has she, not one word—but why was I not to know ? ”

“It’s curious”—Sanderson got up and reached

for a whisky bottle and a glass which stood handy—
“and I wonder how——?”

“No, I won’t have any, thanks. Never mind how, for the present. I’m interested, and think my firm will be interested, as we have nearly a hundred thousand tons afloat. There might be something in this for you and me, too.”

Sanderson reseated himself. “I had thought of coming to you,” he confessed, “but after—that accident, I—well, I couldn’t. And I’m not exactly sure, even now——”

Steele waited a minute, and then, as Sanderson evidently did not intend to complete the sentence, leaned forward. “To fit in with your views, I’ll drive a hard bargain over it, if you wish,” he said. “Of course, I have no certain information, for I’ve come to you to get that, but you’ll understand that apart from any sentimental consideration—quite separate from the fact that I owe my life to you, and would make any small return that lies in my power—the thing has a commercial interest for me, if the rumour I have heard is correct.”

“Well” — Sanderson considered it, and spoke slowly—“on those lines we might—we might make a deal. But I want to know where you got your information.”

“From my wife,” Steele answered.

“Ah! I never thought of that.” He laughed suddenly, and as suddenly grew grave again. “Well, anyhow, the promise was kept.”

“It was, for Connie never mentioned the thing to me. I gather from what I’ve heard that you’ve

done all the work—taken it past the experimental stage ? ”

Sanderson told of the *Maronna* and her captain's report. “I had a letter from him to-day,” he concluded. “The boat will be in dry dock and ready for inspection on Monday.”

Steele thought for a time. “If the inspection proves your claim, I'll buy you out,” he offered.

Sanderson shook his head. “No,” he said decidedly. “I don't want to be bought out.”

“Then I have an alternative proposal. Always supposing that Monday's inspection proves your claim, I'll float an independent company to work it—as the thing has passed experiment, there'll be comparatively little initial expense after plant and offices have been arranged for. A private company with a capital of, say, five thousand pounds, and out of that we'll give you two thousand—half cash and half shares—for the invention.”

“But it's the same thing,” Sanderson objected. “You buy me out that way.”

“We will consider that the shares you hold in the company qualify you for the post of managing director,” Steele explained, “at a nominal salary of two or three hundreds—your dividends will make that into a respectable income, for we don't want to burden the company with heavy expenses, and I'll see that my firm, for one, use and advertise the stuff.”

Sanderson rose and held out his hand. “Shake,” he said ; “it's a deal.”

“And don't think,” Steele urged, as he took the offered hand, “because I am under the greatest

possible obligation to you, that you have the right to consider me totally on the other side of the fence, as far as things of this kind are concerned—let me start level, at least.”

“I reserve my answer,” and Sanderson smiled.

“I suggest a private company, for the present, but you can issue additional shares and let the public in as the thing grows, if you wish—of course, as managing director you will have chief voice in that matter. Now—I’ve not come to stay long to-night—I suggest further that you come up to London with me on Monday and see the *Maronna*, and then come straight home with me to dinner. We shall have nobody there but ourselves, so you needn’t worry about dressing, unless you care to call down here for a suit-case on your way from the station.”

“There’s a very attractive flavour about that suggestion, and I’m very pleased to accept it,” Sanderson answered.

The words made up a platitude, but they made up a truth as well. He knew that he would be very pleased to go to Rockford House again, but, at the point in the development of a knowledge at which he stood, he made no attempt to analyse the feeling or ascertain its causes. He walked up the lane with Steele to sight of the High Street.

“You know that Connie is leaving us on Tuesday ? ” Steele asked, as they went.

“She told me her visit would come to an end next week.” He wondered at the abrupt introduction of her name.

“It seems curious to me, knowing her as I do,

that you should have thought her capable of breaking a promise—even one made in jest. It's not in her nature to do it."

"I don't know her as you do," Sanderson answered reflectively.

"No—perhaps I overlooked that. She'll make a grand woman, some day, will Connie"—the north-country accent, seldom noticeable in his speech, evinced itself—"a woman worth knowing."

The inference was so very obvious that Sanderson smiled as he made some commonplace answer. At the turning to the High Street the two men separated, and Mrs. Wilson, who chanced as usual to be passing, duly noted the occurrence, attributing a dissipated appearance to Steele and a look of anxiety to Sanderson. She found much to tell of both these men, after Elma Steele had stopped in the street to speak with Sanderson.

Mrs. Wilson had a daughter, Frances, a tall, fair, intelligent-looking damsel of about twenty-five, apparently—she was dodging her fortieth birthday, in reality, and paint, padding, and hair-dye accounted for her perennial grace and freshness. She acted in some measure as watch-dog for her mother, questioning where Mrs. Wilson did not care to inquire personally about happenings and people, and reporting things which escaped the elder lady's eye. As an excuse for existing, she posed as an authoress in a small way of business, and gave lectures, from time to time, on cookery—the Wilsons never could keep a cook for longer than six months—and on the art of managing children

and infants, with an occasional reference to the nobility and sacredness of motherhood. She also held the position of honorary secretary to the local branch of the Society for Providing Workhouse Children with Dancing Shoes, of which more anon.

Prominent among Frances' points was a strong sense of filial affection—she never wearied of talking of her mother, and “You don't know my mother, I think?” was a query with which she tortured all who had not that honour, until they submitted to the ordeal of an introduction, which they had probably attempted to escape. Mention is made of the damsel that one may fully comprehend the power to make mischief which—since two heads are far better than one—Mrs. Wilson possessed, and for full comprehension one must be aware of the existence of Frances. Few people heeded the old lady's first words on the subject, but, after Frances had repeated them, after Mrs. Wilson had corroborated Frances and the latter had corroborated her a few times, those who had been unwilling listeners at first came to a vague understanding of the facts that there was a mystery attendant on Esther Sanderson's death, that Steele was not such a model man as might be supposed, and that Sanderson—after his third visit—went to Rockford House far too often.

The programme for Monday was carried through as outlined by Steele. The two men went together to the dock where the *Maronna* lay dry, awaiting them, and Steele walked round the boat, examining her hull minutely. Before leaving the dock he

turned to Captain Ferguson, who had accompanied his visitors on their tour of inspection.

"You say she's not been laid up since this was put on?" Steele asked.

Ferguson, aware of Steele's identity and position, was vastly respectful. "Two years, sir—I can prove it from my own private log, if you wish. Davis was against having it put on, but I——"

"No, don't trouble, thanks," Steele interrupted. He turned to Sanderson.

"I propose that we call it the 'S.S. marine paint,' and incorporate the company under the name of Sanderson and Steele, Limited—that will give the name of the composition a double meaning. Do you second the proposition?"

"I consider it carried—except that your name ought to come first."

"Hardly. All the credit of this is due to you—I simply make money out of it."

"And make it a possibility," Sanderson supplemented.

They went down together by the five-twenty, and Sanderson remembered the mood in which he had gone down alone, not a week before. The world had altered since then—except that the chief pleasure was taken out of his success in that Esther could know nothing of it. The wound caused by her death remained, as far from healing as ever, but events were crowding his days now, and it was only in the night hours that free thought permitted full realisation of his loss—perhaps more full because of the hours in which sense of it was withdrawn.

Showers which had marked the day's beginning

and height had ceased, leaving clear sky and sun as Steele drove in at the gate of Rockford House. Seeing his wife on the lawn, he pulled up.

"You go and tell her what we've done while I take the trap round," he said to Sanderson. "She'll be interested, I know."

Sanderson descended and went out on to the lawn to meet her. "Successful?" she asked, as she shook hands.

"Sanderson and Steele, Limited, thanks to you—and to Miss Gray," he answered.

Was there a shadow passing over her face at his mention of Constance, or did he imagine it? She gave him no time to find an answer to the question.

"I'm glad," she said, "though I knew it would be so, almost. Come out into the meadow, if you are not too tired, and talk—it is cooler there than between these hedges."

A little iron gate gives access from a path beside the lawn to the meadow, which slopes steeply away from the house and gardens, down toward the river valley to north-westward. Elma Steele led the way out to a knoll whence they could look across the valley, on which the high-riding July sun flung glory. Behind them, in the garden hedge, a syringa bush in full flower made perfume, and Elma turned to pluck a blossom.

"Home," she said—"the scent of it is like home, to me, Mr. Sanderson. I feel restless this afternoon."

"Then don't smell syringa," he counselled, "for the sake of its associations."

“ It would make no difference. That is only——”
She did not finish the sentence.

“ Have you syringa there ? ” he asked.

“ It is not that—there is scent always in Grenada. Here, one passes a flower like this, and notes the scent as unusual, or a tree in blossom, and makes comment—but there—there is always perfume, always light and colour of flowers. Trees of scarlet and trees of gold, and the palms in the gardens, and always the sound of the sea, and fireflies, like green stars in the dark—not like this—no, not like this ! ”

She stood looking westward, almost forgetful of Sanderson beside her as she recalled these memories of her home. There had come into her voice a note of indescribable sadness, and Sanderson, watching her, almost feared to speak, lest he should break the spell which held her.

“ I can see it,” she said again—“ as it will be now, before the sunset. As if I stood at Bellevue in Carriacou—there will be a blue haze over St. Vincent, and all the little islands will look like fairy palaces built in the sea, and the east of Morne Fédon will be shadowed, away in Grenada—ah ! Grenada——”

She stretched out her arms toward the west, as if in truth she saw the things of which her words told and would draw near to them, and her face, lit by the sun and by her memories, was in that minute of such beauty that Sanderson regarded her almost with awe.

“ Ah ! Grenada—my home—my home ! ” she cried, and the words made a half-whispered call of infinite pathos, infinite longing.

And then the light died out from her eyes as

surely as if a cloud had passed before the sun, her outstretched hands fell limply—she turned to Sanderson and tried to smile.

“You must think me a fool,” she said quietly.

The sentence made an almost painful anti-climax, so complete was the reaction it evidenced. Sanderson felt that the woman whose passionate longing he had just witnessed was replaced by her opposite in temperament.

“I think only that you loved your home as I loved my sister,” he answered soberly.

“As I might have loved any one—anything—if I had won some return. It is so cold, here—you are all so cold, like your winters, and I——” She hesitated, and let the thought remain unspoken.

“Only on the surface,” he dissented.

“And that surface is iron—hard iron,” she answered quickly. “I—I think sometimes that I shall starve here in England, for want of——”

With a queer, half-choking sound she checked herself again. “I am a fool,” she said, as if angry with herself at these repeated betrayals of things better kept hidden, “and sometimes I know it. But—I will not cease to be so.”

Sanderson had a feeling of bewilderment—these flashing, uncanny changes of mood left him in wondering doubt as to what would be the next emotion displayed by her. She walked on a few steps, and turned.

Turning with her, Sanderson saw, at an upper casement of the house, the face of Constance Gray. She did not move, but looked down steadily, and he knew that she had watched, though she could not

have heard. Consciousness of her presence gave him a sense of sanity, of awakening from a fantastic dream—she was real, a being comprehensible, homelike, while this wonderful, fascinating woman beside him——

What was she—what was that about her which perplexed him so, irritated him with alternate phases of wondering fear of her beauty and the desire to know more? Now, she stood looking at him, smiling at his long silence, and the smile frustrated his attempts at self-questioning—as, he knew, she always frustrated that attempt.

“You’ll find me an awful bore, to-night,” she said. “I am—I’m restless, as I told you. Let us go in—Connie and my husband will be waiting if we stay much longer.”

But she paused again beside the little gate, and Sanderson, following her example, turned to look back. Northward and westward the fertile country lay spread out, and the sweet, faint scent of mown grass spoke of the year’s best time—a little wind rustled the laurels on the edge of the lawn, and filled the sails of slowly moving barges which starred the middle distance and dropped, lazily, down the river with the outgoing tide. While they two stood to watch, the wind failed, and the quiet of approaching eventide seemed laid, like a veil, over the far-reaching view on which they gazed.

“Can Grenada give you better than this?” Sanderson asked.

“Give?” she echoed, with a trace of bitterness in the word. “What has this given me, in spite of its attractiveness? Grenada gave me home and

memories, and some happiness. This has given——” She turned again abruptly. “But you would not understand—you are all so cold and unemotional here in this England. Let us go in.”

After dinner that night she went to the piano and played disconnected scraps of minor melodies while Sanderson talked with Steele and Constance Gray, and once these three ceased their conversation to listen while Elma sang a weird song which, as she told them afterward, she had learned in Grenada through hearing a Haytian half-breed sing it—a succession of minor sounds which stirred melancholy and haunted the memory long after the song had ceased, though all was uttered in some *patois* of which the listeners knew nothing—it was the broken French dialect of Grenada. She was, as she had said, restless and unsettled, and this song told her restlessness.

Some time during the evening Constance, remembering, looked up at Sanderson amusedly. “Mr. Steele has told me your suspicions,” she said, “but I kept my promise.”

“With the same result as if you had broken it,” he answered. “I didn’t see the possibility of your evading it in the way you did, or I would have made it include Mrs. Steele.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have promised then,” she said, with amused defiance of his grave expression.

“Maybe not, but I think you would.”

“It’s too late to find out. Am I forgiven the evasion?”

“Quite,” he answered, “since I never considered forgiveness necessary.”

Later he realised in observing her, while she was unaware of his scrutiny, what an immense change had come over his life since—so short a time before—Esther's death. Up to that point he had been almost a recluse through poverty, while now he had Steele's friendship, free entry to this house—which would open up to him any others that he might choose—and the promise of an assured position in the near future. The stabbing pain caused by Esther's death remained, keen as ever in the many hours which he spent alone, but he had these things. Then, in observing Constance, he fell to wondering what this house would be like without her—after she had gone. To him she seemed a part of it—by turning to her he could regain the true balance of things after Elma's influence had temporarily destroyed it, and he did not want her to go, for he did not know what results might accrue from the spell which Elma cast, when this counteracting personality was withdrawn. It was not that he was dependent on her, but——

With a little, unobserved shrug he tried to dismiss the train of thought, and partially succeeded.

For a few minutes he was alone with her, practically, for Steele left the room to answer a message brought by one of the servants, and Elma sat at the piano, playing. Constance looked at him, and then at Elma, whose back was toward them. She had waited for this chance to speak a thought to him.

“You know that I am going to-morrow—that I shall not see you again ? ” she asked.

"I should not put it in that way," he objected, returning her look in a manner which brought an access of colour to her cheeks.

"I mean—not for a long time," she amended. "It will be months before I come here again."

"I'm sorry—more than sorry," he answered earnestly.

"So am I," she confessed, "though it's the first time I have ever been sorry to go home. But—I think I could do good by staying here."

"You mean——?" He could not understand to what her words could refer.

"But I am going." She disregarded the incomplete question. "And—may I warn you, Mr. Sanderson?"

"Warn me?" He repeated it in a puzzled way—he had not anticipated enigmas from her.

"Just two words," she pursued deliberately. "I should like to think that you remembered them in any possibilities which may arise before I see you again—that you remembered and acted on them."

"I don't understand," he said. "What are the two words?"

"'Be careful,' that's all," she answered, still more deliberately, and looking across at Elma.

"Still I don't understand."

"I didn't expect you would—I only ask you to remember them. It may be difficult."

"I'll try—but I have no idea of their meaning."

"That will come—all I ask is that you remember," she said, with odd insistence.

“Till you come again”—he spoke the words as if they were a promise—“you will come again?”

“Yes”—and she smiled—“I shall come again.”

“You see—there has been no chance to tell you—we have had so little time together—but I want you to come again. Do you understand?”

“I know.” She returned his gaze steadily, and smiled. Steele’s return prevented Sanderson from further explanation.

“If there is anything to tell, you shall tell it—when I come again,” Constance said.

He recalled, after, how he bade her good-bye—how he took her hand, and, holding it, meeting her clear, straightforward glance, spoke—

“I shall wait for you—Constance—I shall look for your coming,” he said.

Then, so far as memory told, he was walking homeward, looking up at clear starlight, recalling her answering smile and sudden start as he uttered her name. He felt strong in thinking of the promise which her eyes had given him, and which he trusted to the future to fulfil.

THE SECOND PHASE

CHAPTER VII

ELMA STEELE EXPLAINS

EVERY summer the Brayley branch of the Society for Providing Workhouse Children with Dancing Shoes organised a bazaar, and every winter that same branch gave a concert, the shekels resulting from these two functions being handed over, presumably, to the heads of the society, after accounts had been squared up. The slight alteration which I find myself compelled to make in the title of the society is of no consequence, since it gives just as good an idea of the influence in Brayley of that institution as the real name would have done. The average middle and upper-middle class dame and damsel love to play at charity for the sake of the other little games it covers, and care but slightly for the form which the result may take so long as an opportunity is afforded them of indulging in their game.

Originally, the Brayley branch of the society had a sort of affinity with Wesleyanism, but gradually its influence extended so far as to include most of the followers of the Established Church as well.

It is a pleasure to record the fact that in Brayley these two sects dwelt together in peace and amity—the lion lay down with the lamb, so to speak, and evinced no desire to lie down outside the lamb. It is sad, however, to be obliged to confess that the Baptist community of the place (known locally as “Dippers”) regarded and were regarded with cold hostility as far as the two preceding sects were concerned. Brayley was strong on religion, to the extent of professing it, and some other forms of worship—it may have been that they contained more form than worship—were supported, in addition to the three already mentioned. There were even two or three open-air sects who sang (out of tune) in the High Street every Sunday evening, perhaps under the impression that they were doing good in some way, though it is hard to conjecture what good they could possibly achieve by their cold-blooded slaughter of innocent hymn tunes such as “The devil and me we can’t agree,” and other gems of sacred thought and melody.

But the Established Church and the Wesleyans, first and second in influence (with the Dippers a bad third and the rest of the field nowhere), added lustre to their haloes by controlling both the annual bazaar and annual concert to which reference has already been made. The bazaar was usually held on the third Wednesday in July, the venue being Brayley recreation-room, which, possessing an exceedingly pretty garden, admitted with the co-operation of the weather of tea on the lawn, of several stalls being arranged in the garden, and of a general open-air aspect being given to the proceed-

ings. Lady Mudd, the bewigged, bejewelled, false-toothed, powdered and painted spouse of Sir James Mudd, and patroness of the society, usually honoured Brayley by condescending to open the bazaar, and, as may be inferred from the presence of a titled dame, everybody went, and gladly suffered the imposition of purchasing, at treble the market price, articles which they did not want, for charity's sweet sake. They went for the same reason that their prototypes in a higher circle of society went to the opera, or to Scotland in autumn, or to Baden and Homburg once a year—not because they enjoyed it, but because it was the correct thing to do.

Lady Mudd was billed to get in her work at three o'clock, but nobody—save and except the local newspaper men—thought of arriving until a half-hour after that time, at the earliest, for Lady Mudd was compelled to sit on a platform for that half-hour and listen while deacons, churchwardens, and other luminaries of the two sects represented, under the pretext of moving and seconding votes of thanks and other resolutions, uttered flatteries, sickly and fulsome, regarding her ladyship's goodness and generosity and indefatigable efforts for charity's sweet sake. There was Mr. Bull, who had made his money in rhubarb—and looked like rhubarb come to life, without sugar—who proposed a vote of thanks to the workers; there was Mr. Sands, who represented the tomato in a wholesale way, and who seconded Mr. Bull's vote; there was Mr. Wiggins, a City man, who had best opportunity of all in proposing a vote of thanks to Lady Mudd for her, etc. etc.

And so on, *ad libitum*, while the local newspaper men, forming the backbone of the audience, were so vulgar as to yawn over the proceedings, which they characterised as "guff," and so mindful of the exigencies of space in their respective papers that they let these valuable examples of oratory pass unrecorded and lost to posterity for ever. For which posterity ought to rise up and bless them while the memory of those annual bazaars endures among men.

Ladies were in the majority, so far as the attendance at the bazaar was concerned, but there were men present—old men, middle-aged men, and young men—all looking excessively Good and Moral, as befitted the occasion. The young men made themselves useful in organising competitions of varying degrees of idiocy, and in other capacities, while the married men, mindful of prices, manœuvred with more or less success in keeping their wives away from the stalls. A number, made up of both married and single, wandered about disconsolately, finding nothing to do, wondering why they had come, not liking to go, and exchanging jerky platitudes with each other regarding the state of the weather. These visitors appeared about as comfortable as the oft-quoted man who knows his tie is slipping up the back of his collar while he is in a position which forbids him to pull it down, and from them sundry damsels with trays of rapidly withering flowers extracted toll from time to time, until almost every one of the unlucky sufferers sported a draggled-looking "buttonhole" of dimensions sadly out of proportion with its attractiveness.

Among these bulls in a china shop one may place Jack Sanderson, who, having met Elma Steele once since Constance Gray's departure, had promised her that he would attend the bazaar. He had had no experience of bazaars or functions of the kind, and felt absolutely foolish among this assembly of tittering girls, chattering women, and obtrusively Good men. He managed to obtain some respite from his isolation by seizing on Burrows for a short time, in which he learned quite a lot concerning Upanishads and Vedas and Esoteric Buddhism, which was Burrows' latest crank, and which he followed assiduously—and purely as a recreation—in intervals of strenuous work for the Cause of Female Suffrage. But Burrows had a share in matters connected with the organisation of the bazaar, and, seeing that these required his attention, he bustled off, leaving Sanderson alone again.

Out of the corner of his eye Sanderson observed Mrs. Brace, who, fully equipped with furs and an expansive smile, stood talking with Mrs. Wilson. He saw, too, how the latter lady left her friend and bore down on him with visible intent, whereat he turned in a species of desperation to escape. Then was it that he saw the vicar, who stood alone on the lawn surveying the proceedings, and, discerning salvation in the presence of the reverend gentleman, he made for it. The vicar greeted him in his usual nervous way, and was evidently surprised to see him.

"I hardly thought—I hardly expected to see you here," he said.

Sanderson smiled. "It's the first time," he answered, "and I think it will be the last."

"Some people extract enjoyment from it. Personally——" He finished the sentence with a little jerk of his head which implied that he found about as much enjoyment as Sanderson appeared to be experiencing.

"I presume you regard it as your duty to attend?"

"I must keep in touch," the vicar said gravely. "Yes, I must keep in touch. By the way——"

He paused, apparently more nervous than ever, and Sanderson waited. At last he made a plunge.

"Your father was my friend, Mr. Sanderson, and I've always been interested in you, as I was in your sister. I don't see why I shouldn't speak—about the Steeles."

"Well?" Sanderson looked his surprise.

"I know of no worse place than this for the attributing of wrong motives to what may be utterly innocent actions. I don't say that any cause has arisen—I don't think any cause has arisen, and it is early yet to speak, but—already your visits to Rockford House are spoken of in Brayley."

"Well?" Sanderson asked again, with a satiric inflection.

"You see, the difference between your position and Steele's accounts for the view taken of the matter by slanderous—I don't think it too strong a word to use—by slanderous tongues. And"—his tone bespoke the sincere interest of a good man—"I wish you to understand that it is with full belief

in you—with every confidence in you—I ask you to limit your visits to Rockford House to the hours Steele himself spends there.”

Standing silent for a minute, Sanderson remembered Constance Gray’s warning, and—but no, she could not have referred to this, for she had said that it might be difficult to be careful. He looked steadily at the vicar.

“I believe you asked this from the best possible motives,” he said, “and I owe you thanks for asking it. But I make no promise—so long as my own conscience does not accuse me I—well, I can afford to ignore slander.”

“Can you ? ” the vicar asked. “More, can Mrs. Steele afford it ? ”

“Yes.” He uttered the assertion confidently. Remembering the little he had seen of her, he felt certain that she would have returned the same answer.

Mrs. Stacey came up and claimed the vicar’s attention, commencing a machine-gun fire of words which had a somewhat stupefying effect on their object. Sanderson fled, fearing lest she might have ammunition in reserve for him—and then he saw Elma Steele, who, leaving a little group which included Lady Mudd, walked out on to the lawn toward him as he turned from the vicar.

“I have been here ten minutes,” Elma announced, “and I’m tired of it.”

“Tea ? ” he queried, nodding toward the tables just outside the recreation-room.

“Not yet,” she answered. “There is a path leading from this garden to the top of the Castle

Hill—I should like to go there, first, away from this. To see it without hearing it—you understand ? ”

“ I know,” he said. As always, she gave him the impression of one foreign, alien from her surroundings.

Three hundred yards, or less, divide the garden from the Castle Hill, which is common ground in Brayley. They two went up the grass-grown path to the flat, round summit of the hill, where Elma leaned against the one fragment of wall which remains above ground from the great castle of Norman times, and Sanderson stood beside her. Silhouetted against the sky, and in full view of all Brayley, they stood, while Mrs. Wilson rushed to Mrs. Brace to point them out to her, informing her in solemn tones that their excursion in such an open, intimate manner admitted of only one conclusion, and what could William Steele be thinking of to let his wife go on like that ?

Meanwhile Elma, who had spoken no word since they set out, turned back to look at the bazaar and its votaries, and laughed a little.

“ Do you know that half the bees down there are buzzing our names ? ” she asked.

“ I think it very likely,” Sanderson answered, with evident indifference ; “ but the bees are stingless.”

“ Not willingly.” She turned away with a little shrug which indicated that she shared his estimate of their value, and looked out westward—the hill gives a different aspect of the view which may be obtained from the lawn and meadow at Rockford House.

"It is pretty," she commented. "It is not beautiful like Grenada, but I grant that it is pretty."

"It's more than pretty," he answered, with faint irritation at her indifference to its beauty.

"But that which it implies"—she turned abruptly and faced him—"in all these eight years I have never spoken like this to any one—I tell you so lest you should think me always restless and discontented."

"I don't think it," he answered sincerely.

"And I thought from the first—more, after you had saved my husband's life, that it would be good for me—I had always wanted some listener to whom I could tell these thoughts. Morbid thoughts, perhaps, but less morbid if told, and you came into my life at a time—you fitted in with a mood——"

She spoke hesitatingly, and with a note of uncertainty in her voice which was new to him. "I'm glad to think—if mere listening is a service——" he said lamely, and paused.

"So I come to you," she concluded, "for I know that I gain more than the mere listening." She looked at him steadily. "I could not tell—him—so I come to you."

"You were saying"—he spoke hastily, for the expression in her eyes disconcerted him—"that which this view implies——"

"Ah!" She laughed a little. "To look out on that view, to realise its existence, means that one must also realise the existence of this"—she turned and indicated the garden whence they had come. "And it is all so very cold—so very small."

"There are exceptions," he dissented, "or rather

I might say that absolute littleness and coldness are exceptions. Take away half a dozen from the people down there, and you'll find much that is good in all the rest."

"But I contrast them with my home"—she turned away from sight of the garden, leaned on the moss-covered masonry before her, and again he saw in her face a faint reflex of the expression he had seen in the meadow at Rockford House—"I cannot forget or cease to make the contrast—for eight years I have tried, and the memory of what I left for this has not lessened. There is no sincerity in this, to-day—it is a play that they have played every year since I came to Rockford, and each time I see it I know there is no kindness, no feeling, and very little sincerity in any word I hear—it is a play, no more."

Knowing that she expressed a truth, he did not answer.

"And I miss—even after eight years—I miss the things I knew. I remember picnics to Morne Fédon, and boating on the Grand Etang, and the parties to Lake Antoine, and, sometimes, days at Hillsborough in Carriacou. And the dances at St. George's—not these things in themselves, but that they gave friendliness—there was warmth and real companionship, and one knew that a laugh or a spoken word was sincere. I sit here idle in England, idle since I cannot be otherwise, and—but that time will not come again."

Had any other spoken to him thus, he might have said that a querulous woman made complaint against imaginary ills. Here he listened, looked,

and found that the inner thought from which these words of hers sprang—the inexplicable motive which is behind conscious thought—had an echo in himself. He saw reason in her apparent unreason, for she had influence over him, and power to colour his thoughts and determine the point from which he should take his view—a power of which he had not yet realised the extent. With her, he lost his own outlook on life, and perforce adopted hers.

“But don’t you think we all look back on youth in that way?” he queried.

“You look back on it with regret for its passing,” she answered, “and even in Grenada I knew that regret. But this, my eight years’ folly—I stand alone, here among many—I am not of them, and after eight years among them I stand alone.”

She smiled, a sad little smile, and Sanderson waited.

“We were poor,” she said again. “I have sat up at night to mend my daddy’s coat, or to alter an old dress that I might go to a dance—my daddy was proud of me, and wanted me to go to the dances, and I—I loved him. He was proud of our name, too, and used to tell me stories of the time when the Delareys had been great lords in France—I am a Delarey.” She stood up away from the moss-grown wall for a minute, proudly, a woman who might with justice make the claim that name implied. “But we were poor, and though we were very happy together, my daddy and I, it was hard for me to see how he would brood over other times—his father’s days, when we had more than the

name. Harder still to know that each day left us poorer."

She turned to look down at the garden, and then leaned again on the stone. "Do I weary you?" she asked.

"You interest me," he answered; "only that word is hardly strong enough to express it."

"I have told all," she said, "so I cannot interest you any more. But—my daddy writes me by every mail, long letters, and tells me that they remember and speak of me. It is not—it is that he remembers and speaks of me—he had only me, and sometimes I wonder if I did well. I know he is not poor now, but he is quite alone."

"If you did well?" Sanderson asked, not quite comprehending.

"I thought you knew." She turned toward him and spoke with deliberate, distinct emphasis—he never forgot the words, nor the manner in which they were uttered. "It was because we were poor that I left him—that I came to William Steele."

Then, turning without giving him time to comment, even had he wished it, she began to descend the hill. But he could not have commented, for the manner of that last sentence admitted no answer.

"Come," she said lightly. "It is time for tea."

Later, when she had gone down to the station to meet her husband, Sanderson walked home alone and tried to arrange his impressions of the afternoon. He strove to regain the view which had been his before Elma Steele replaced it with her own, to insist on the uselessness of this persistent setting of herself against her life, which she

had expressed in that strange explanation of herself on the Castle Hill. His striving was futile, for he had the memory of her eyes and of her voice—against that memory he could not bring enough to bear.

Suddenly he understood—Constance Gray had gone. To himself he confessed at last that he had depended on her, and that, although he had seen her but a very few times, he needed the influence of her mere presence now. The confession meant weakness, yet, in that he could bring himself to acknowledge the weakness, there was a certain strength.

He stands here in this phase of development as one influenced by a woman of great power, and, in spite of the weakness which forced him to admit dependence on another, evincing strength in that, realising the existence of that subtle, almost imperceptibly acting power, he could make the effort to resist it where another might have yielded without perception or effort. Understanding the aid Constance might have given him by her presence, he wished that she had not gone.

He realised another cause behind the wish, for that which he saw as good in her called up all the best in himself—wakened the side of the man which was in danger of lapsing to a sleep, now. It would be months, she had said, before she could come again, but, if he still lived at the end of that time—yes, if he still lived—— With suddenly awakened pain he recalled how Esther had died.

Then the memory of Elma Steele's eyes mastered his thoughts, and the fancied sound of her voice . . . an impression he could not quite shake off.

CHAPTER VIII

A STEP FORWARD

BEFORE the end of July the firm of Sanderson and Steele received its certificate of incorporation, which was framed and hung in an inner office, a special private sanctum devoted to Sanderson's use in his capacity of managing director. A place was found for the erection of works down in the east end, but the offices of the company were located in one of the comparatively quiet streets which lie eastward from and near by Charing Cross station. With a comfortable sum of money behind him, and the assurance of an income sufficient for all ordinary needs, Sanderson felt that life was shaping itself on easy lines for him—too late, since Esther was dead.

There was something abnormal and noxious, a kink in an otherwise healthy temperament, in the persistent manner in which he brooded over Esther's death, dwelt on it and hugged his loss, as it were. Admitting that little more than a month had passed since her funeral, and the circumstances surrounding her death—the suddenness with which the tragedy was hurled at him—and taking into account the abnormally strong affection which had existed

between these two, and his lack of definite belief in things spiritual, through which he regarded this loss as final and absolute—there still remains that in his attitude which evinced some defect or deficiency in his nature, some twist which must have existed to allow of his morbid, unhealthy view.

Apart from this he might be noted, from an everyday point of view, as a man of somewhat exceptional abilities, and as one worth knowing. Had influences remained in contact with him to appeal to and stimulate his higher faculties—had Constance Gray, for instance, been an active factor in his life throughout the months of shaping and development which followed on her going—it may have been that the world would have heard of him, for there was in him something very nearly akin to genius, though, so far, it had found but slight means of expression. As has been said already, he was one who stood out from the ruck—a man, not a cipher. Insistence on this point becomes a necessity since, with a few exceptions, he dwelt among a community of ciphers.

Considering the proximity of Brayley to London, it was only natural that news of the formation of the company should precede the actual event, among the inhabitants of the village. It is understood that Mr. Wiggins telephoned the information through to his wife—for it was considered quite the thing in Brayley to advertise the fact that one was on the telephone, and to take trunk calls, concerning nothing in particular, from the city. Certain it is that at Liverpool Street Mr. Wiggins, being a gossip sort of man, poked his head in at

almost every window of the five-twenty as he went up the platform, and imparted the information regarding the new company to his fellow-travellers. Equally certain it is that, on arriving at Brayley, these gentlemen found that the news had preceded them, and that their wives knew more about it than themselves—as a woman always does when she gets an equal amount of information with a man.

Comments varied in their nature. The vicar was unaffectedly pleased to hear the news, and made a point of calling at Sanderson's thatched cottage to express his pleasure; a few people who had known Jack as a boy, and who had been intimate with his father, considered this as only the first step in the making of an exceptional career; and the majority, who may be summed up as expressing their view through Mrs. Wilson, took the more human and uncharitable view, said "Ah!" in a way which implied "I told you so," and, discussing the event among themselves, told each other that they had expected something of the sort since Sanderson saved Steele's life, that the latter had chosen a handsome and tactful way of rewarding his rescuer, but that—well, really, you know, Sanderson had done nothing to deserve it, and the same end might have been accomplished much more cheaply and with equal benefit to Sanderson. Still, if Mr. Steele chose to waste his money in that way—here a shrug and a lifting of the eyebrows would imply the speaker's opinion of the waste of money.

I find myself in constant disagreement with an

ancient platitude to the effect that the members of the British middle class, taken as a class, are stodgily dull and virtuous. It is time that fallacy was placed among such exploded theories as the flatness of the earth and the brilliancy of Halley's comet, for in that middle class one may meet such people as Mr. and Mrs. Burrows, Mrs. Wilson and her kind, and it is there that one may meet men like Steele—surely these extremes of type are sufficient to remove the reproach of dulness. And as for virtue—well, every class possesses a sort of decorum, viewed as a class, but, taken individually——

From this point, whatever your class, follow back along your own reminiscences.

It happened on the last Tuesday in July that Sanderson, reaching Liverpool Street in time to catch the midday train down to Brayley, met Elma Steele at the barrier. She stood looking back toward the booking-office, and informed Sanderson that she half expected to meet her husband, who had said in the morning, as they travelled up together, that he might be able to come down by that train. Sanderson waited beside her until two minutes before the train went out, and then she gave up her vigil.

“After all, it was only a chance,” she said, as she turned away.

Walking beside her up the platform, Sanderson found her an empty first-class compartment, for that midday train carries few first-class passengers save on Saturdays. He opened the carriage door

and waited, but she stood hesitant instead of entering.

"Wouldn't you prefer a smoking carriage?" she asked.

So far, bearing in mind the long tongues of Brayley and the fact that some of their owners were almost certain to be on the train, he had had no intention of travelling with her—and, as an additional reason, he still held a "third" season ticket. The question, however, left him no alternative short of discourtesy or, worse still, explanation, and he entered the carriage.

"It makes no difference," he said; "the journey is too short to matter."

Very few first-class passengers enter that train from the stations at which it calls, and these two went down alone. Looking at his fellow-traveller as they went out from Liverpool Street, Sanderson observed that she smiled amusedly.

"I was thinking that this accident of meeting you will give Brayley something to discuss," she explained.

"It will," he answered, somewhat grimly.

She left her seat in the corner opposite, and sat down beside him. "That makes talking easier," she explained, to account for the change. "Do you care what they say?"

"Not a bit," he answered, "since I know they'll lie in any case." He remembered the vicar's question—"So long as my own conscience does not accuse me I can afford to ignore scandal." He used almost the same words to account for his carelessness as those with which he had answered the vicar.

"I had a conscience, once," she observed, with a little laugh of mockery.

"That was—in Grenada?" he asked, feeling that it was a safe subject.

"I have no wish to remember Grenada, to-day," she answered, with a trace of abruptness.

He had not desired this meeting—rather had he striven to avoid it—for proximity with her gave him a sense of insecurity, though there was no definable cause for that sense. He would have avoided such a journey as this, had it been possible, but in spite of his attempt to leave her at Liverpool Street and travel alone—or perhaps because of it—he found his thoughts veering, changing, and in a glance at her he realised anew the dark, foreign beauty which was hers. The perplexing feeling that she was an unknown quantity, an unrealised, exotic being, apart from the commonplace people of everyday life, added to her fascination for him, and, though in a way he wished the journey ended, another and almost purely physical sense wakened and drugged the wish—yet it would not quite sleep. And between the two conflicting emotions was that of tense anticipation, as of strange happenings which the immediate future might hold.

"You think, perhaps," she said again, "because of two—no, three occasions—that I live on my memories, and have no interest in things of the present—but that is not so. Except in those moods, and they do not often come to me, I have interests. There is amusement in meeting people like Mr. Wiggins, or Mr. and Mrs. Burrows—and

in some people there is real interest. I do not spend all my life in chasing shadows with a butterfly net."

Drugged completely now, that wish of his slept past wakening, for the time. He smiled at her simile. "I never attributed it to you," he said.

"Then there is another way in which you may gain a wrong impression," she pursued, speaking in a tone of cool, ordinary friendliness. "You may think that I always talk of myself. How is the company progressing?"

"It's almost too early to tell," he answered, puzzled by her quiet, almost businesslike manner—this was not Elma Steele as he knew her. "Indications point the right way, though—several people are interested, and some of them rather important people. I think we shall do well."

"I want you to do well," she said reflectively.

"Yes?" He made the monosyllable express uncomprehending stolidity, though with her last sentence she had swept away his complacency, reawakened the sensation of vague expectancy which he had lost. "Why?" (He realised the folly of that second monosyllable as soon as he had uttered it.)

"Why?" She echoed it and laughed, half-turning toward him. "Do you remember the day when I called you and spoke to you—that day when I was driving?"

"I remember," he answered slowly, and thinking of Esther's death.

"I had seen you, often, and had wondered—formed an estimate. Though it is a confession,

I had wanted to know you. And I should not like to be mistaken in my estimate—I want you to justify it.”

“First impressions are hardly safe guides,” he remarked a little confusedly.

She bent forward, looking up at him with a smile which had somewhat of wistfulness in it.

“I know—I have been mistaken once,” she said, with a trace of vague regret in the words, “and I wished—I did not wish to be mistaken in this impression of you. I wanted—I want great things for you.”

“If I gain them, I shall remember that you helped me,” he answered, touched by her voice to feeling, and remembering that he owed his present place, in some measure, to her influence with Steele.

“I want——” She leaned toward him, and in place of the smile her eyes had expressed was earnest, sincere questioning. “Tell me, would you think me strange in that I cannot govern all my wishes and interests? Remember, in a way I am alone, and—don’t you find impulse stronger than will, sometimes?”

“Equally strong,” he confessed. Had reasoning been possible, he might have said that he found impulse hard to resist now, for he knew a desire to answer in other words.

The train drew up at a little wayside station. Elma laid her hand on his, and there was that in her touch which added to the spell she cast about him. Had one been there to see and understand, that one would have said she played on his emotions as a practised musician on a keyboard, governing,

blending, and leading to a clearly determined end with infinite patience. In after time, when he could look back uninfluenced, he came to an understanding of her skill.

“When I said alone, I meant alone except for you,” she explained. “I should like you to remember it.”

She rose abruptly, and, crossing to the other side of the carriage, let down the window and looked out. Sanderson watched her—he resisted the impulse to call her back, to tell her that he would always remember. He thought of her standing with hands outstretched in the meadow, and as she had stood beside him on the Castle Hill, and now, womanly, friendly—was it more than friendly? In every aspect stronger, deeper than others. He yielded without further effort to the feeling which had had its birth when he stood beside her in the meadow, without realising that he yielded, even, and without sufficient analysis of the feeling to know that in this slight change of view he moved a step nearer to the danger which, not an hour before, he had perceived and feared.

She came back from the window and sat beside him again, silent for a time. Some sweet, unfamiliar scent which was about her reached his nostrils, and he always associated it with that journey, after. He was quite content, for the time, to sit thus, almost touching her, owning no thought of possible result from this day’s happenings or of that which lay beyond the veil of friendship between them—knowing in her only a friend, since circumstances had ordered that she should be no more.

Apart from all question of right and wrong, there was in this new view of his a step well planned, and splendidly accomplished, on Elma's part. As in a siege of old time the assailant might beat down and carry the outer defences, and then rest, knowing that the advantage gained was permanent, waiting opportunity and fresh aid before attacking the strong citadel which these outworks had rendered still more secure—so she had advanced one step, and now waited. Yet in waiting she could not have known of the tremendous aid which a little time would give her, and in that one may see a mere trick of fate, a swing of the long arm of coincidence which mars the best plans or makes the worst more effective.

She leaned toward him, touching him, as the train jarred to a standstill in Brayley station. "I shall remember this journey," she said.

The sentence was like the last stroke of the brush which an artist gives before he steps back from the completed picture. And, like an artist, she surveyed her work—she planned to win this man from the influence Constance Gray had typified, she planned to break down the forces of heredity and training, to blind him to all but herself, to depose reason, the king, and set up desire, the ethnarch. She planned well and worked subtly, but in one thing she erred.

She saw her ethnarch as a king.

Steele and Sanderson went up to London together on the morning following the latter's journey down with Elma. The two men talked, for a time, over the new company and its prospects.

"It will be big," Steele said. "If the present prospects count for anything, the capital will come back in dividends in about four years."

"We want the Admiralty," Sanderson suggested.

Steele laughed. "You'll get the Admiralty when every continental government and every big shipping firm has come in—not before. They move—well, a tortoise is greased lightning by comparison, so far as anything new is concerned. That is, unless one has an uncle at Whitehall."

"I had thought of going there to see if they would do anything, before you came to me."

"By the way"—Steele opened up another subject after a silence—"my wife tells me that you came down with her yesterday."

"I rather wonder that somebody else didn't tell you, judging from what Brayley is," Sanderson remarked, smiling.

"You forget—I'm the one man they wouldn't tell," Steele dissented. "I've thought, several times, of moving out of the place, for my wife's sake. There are some good people in it, but the majority are insufferable, and she never seems to take root there."

"Possibly there's too much difference between that and the life she left." He made the suggestion from a conviction that she would never "take root" in such a place as Steele would choose, in spite of the latter's affection for her and pride in her.

"Possibly," Steele agreed, "and in that case there's no remedy but to move back to Grenada, which I can't do, and wouldn't, if I could. I think, sometimes—I think she has a rather lonely life of it."

“ But you’re not sure ? ” He asked it in a reflective way.

“ One is never sure,” Steele said thoughtfully. “ Each of us, man or woman, is absolutely isolated where some things are concerned—I often realise that isolation, and know I can’t share one part of my life with any one—a part of its problems. We stand quite alone to face those problems, however near another may be to us—we don’t tell because it’s impossible to tell, impossible to make that other understand, no matter how intimate the relations may be.”

Sanderson nodded—he was thinking of his sister. “ It is so,” he concurred.

“ And I’m glad we came to know you,” Steele pursued, following out his train of thought. “ I think you make a new interest in our two lives—almost as much in my wife’s as in mine.”

He expressed the opinion as if considering an impersonal matter, one of mutual interest. Mr. Wiggins, reading his morning paper in the opposite corner of the carriage, looked over the top of it at the two men. Steele had unconsciously raised his voice a little toward the end of the last sentence, and Mr. Wiggins was curious—he wanted to know more.

“ It’s rather amusing to think of the different way in which people regard me since I came to know you,” Sanderson remarked. “ They used to ignore me, nearly, but I’ve had a dozen invitations to various places in the last fortnight. I was thinking—are you going to the Staceys’ ? ”

“ When ? ” Steele asked.

"Friday—Mrs. Stacey is giving a dance to celebrate the fact that her second daughter has put her hair up and may be regarded as marketable. I thought you knew of it."

"I had forgotten," Steele answered indifferently. "I shall look in, probably, just to take my wife—I should never go for my own sake."

"No?"

"I'm too old," Steele explained, "and heart trouble barred me from dancing years ago—I've not many more years in front of me. And this girl—I remember Cecilia Stacey with long legs and short frocks, when I first came to Brayley."

"I should judge, so far as one can tell by outward appearances, that those attributes are exactly reversed, now," Sanderson commented. "Anyhow, I'm sure as far as the frocks are concerned."

"Friday night, isn't it?" Steele asked, smiling.

"Yes. I think I shall turn up. Mrs. Stacey is a good sort, in spite of her tongue."

"We haven't many better in Brayley," Steele agreed, as they drew into Liverpool Street.

The two men separated at the terminus, and, as he went to his own office, Sanderson reflected over the truth contained in Steele's words regarding the isolation of individuals. For himself, he knew it was good that this should be.

With odd irrelevance, Constance Gray's warning came back into his mind. It came into a tumbled medley of half-formed thoughts concerning his journey with Elma Steele on the preceding day, concerning the dance at which he would meet Elma Steele on Friday evening, and, a fainter background,

an hour on the Castle Hill. "Be careful," he said, aloud.

For in a flash of clear vision, passed almost as soon as come to him, he knew that Constance had foreseen happenings like these, and so had warned him. And, though the clear sight passed, the knowledge of her meaning remained.

THE END OF THE SECOND PHASE

THE THIRD PHASE

CHAPTER IX

FRIDAY

AT noon of the last Friday in July Sanderson arrived at Liverpool Street station in a taxi, with fifteen minutes to spare before the departure of the midday train for Brayley.

For about five minutes he stood before the time-tables in the main-line booking-hall, apparently following out the runs of certain trains, but in reality more concerned with such men as came into the booking-hall from the station yard. He made a rather conspicuous figure, standing there, glancing from the time-tables a dozen times a minute to scrutinise a face—men alone interested him, and he took no notice of the women. On such as returned his glance he looked steadily, and at last, evidently resigning himself to the fact that the man whom he expected would not appear, he went out on to the platform, near by the book-stall—and faced Elma Steele.

A close observer would have detected from a frown, which came and passed on his face in a second, that she was not a welcome intruder on his

thoughts at that minute. He smiled, however, as he greeted her, and even in speaking looked away behind her at a man who, passing, had glanced at him. Then, satisfied that he had been mistaken once more, he looked at her again.

"This is an unexpected pleasure—twice in one week, too," he said.

"I've been shopping again," she answered. "And you—I'm afraid the new company sees very little of you, since you come down by the midday train so often," and she shook her head slightly, with a smiling assumption of reproach.

"This is only the second time"—he spoke in a preoccupied way—"and except that I don't intend to begin going up on Saturdays I think the company deserves——"

He broke off and swung round to look behind him with almost startling abruptness. "Excuse me," he said, turning toward her again. "I rather expected to meet an acquaintance here this morning, and I'm afraid he may turn up yet."

"Afraid?" she echoed, laughing.

He started perceptibly, and stared at her as if he thought the repetition of the word might hold a second meaning. Then, evidently satisfied, "Yes," he answered, "since I have met you."

Yet again he turned half round to look behind him, and she regarded him curiously. This was not the man with whom she had travelled down three days since, and the change in him—these abrupt movements and fits of abstraction—puzzled her. She turned towards the bookstall.

"I want a paper," she announced.

“ Let me get it for you ? ” he suggested.

“ No, it is a feminine paper, and you would not care to inquire for it. I will get it.”

“ At least, let me carry that bag for you ? ”

She held out the bag toward him—it was a dainty trifle of netted silk, secured and carried by a thin gold chain which ran round its upper edge, and with its contents visible through the coarse net of which it was made. While she obtained her paper he stood fingering the bag as if, having obtained it, he had no idea of the correct method of disposing of it. The chief item among its contents was a flimsy paper package which, already evincing signs of moist stickiness, evidently contained sweets. In an absent way Sanderson folded the top of the bag down and placed it in his pocket—even as he did this he turned abruptly to look at the booking-hall entrance, as if that acquaintance of his might still appear.

“ What have you done with my bag ? ” Elma asked, returning with her paper.

“ The bag ? ” he queried, as if he had lost sight and thought of it together. “ Ah ! of course—I put it in my pocket.”

“ But you’ll squash my sweets,” she objected.

“ Not so,” he dissented, with more gravity than the subject warranted. “ It’s a very roomy pocket. But it’s time we were making for the train, isn’t it ? ”

He paused, however, at the stall under the bridge, and, taking a packet of chocolate from the stall, laid down a two-shilling piece by way of payment and departed without waiting for change. “ Yours

is such a small packet," he explained. "So—this will do for the journey down."

They went on. At the barrier he paused again to look back, up at the bridge, out along toward the booking-hall. "You are still expecting somebody?" Elma asked.

"It was more that I wondered if any one would come than that I expected," he answered slowly.

He made some inquiry relative to the times of trains from the collector, who knew him by sight, at the barrier, and then went on with Elma down the platform. A small boy came running and touched him on the back—he started as if a shot had been fired, and Elma saw with wonder that, as he turned, his face whitened and his lips set close—an expression in which defiance was mixed with fear.

"Your change, sir," the boy said, holding out a shilling.

"Oh, keep it—you're too honest to live long," Sanderson answered, turning away with a sigh of relief.

A porter came along from the front of the train slamming doors—Elma stopped before an empty first-class compartment, and the porter, pausing, held the door open. She stepped in, but Sanderson stood looking back toward the barrier.

"Going on, sir? Train's just off."

He came forward to the carriage door, slowly, and still looking toward the barrier. "Better hurry up, sir—she's going," the porter admonished, for the guard's flag was waving from the rear end of the train, which commenced to move as the

door slammed. Sanderson sat down in the corner facing the engine, nearest the platform, and drew a long breath. Elma regarded him curiously.

“What is it all about?” she asked.

“I’m restless, that’s all,” he answered. “I—I didn’t sleep last night.”

“Any reason?” she asked again, regarding him intently.

“There was none.”

“But is there any reason now?” she persisted.

He shook his head, but did not answer verbally. Looking up at her as the carriage clanked out from the dark arches of Bishopsgate, he realised that this hour was his, at least—though it were the last hour he had to call his own, what mattered the things which came after? The thought was of a piece with the rest of his mood; it marked relaxation of the tension which those minutes of strained expectancy on the platform had brought about. Now he had no need to look behind; he was safe and alone—with Elma Steele, and, heedless of any consequence, he told himself that the hour was his. Most probably consequence would never affect him, since——

But that was a thought which belonged to the time beyond this hour, and he would not follow it out to a conclusion. He crossed the carriage, seating himself beside Elma.

“Twice, in one week,” he said. “There’s fate in it.”

She drew back into the corner and away from him, with a sharply indrawn, almost audible breath. Twenty miles without a stop lay before them, she

knew, and in those miles was crisis—the crisis for which she had planned. Yet on the edge of it she hesitated—the change in Sanderson was so acute, so sudden, and though she had led until to-day, she knew that he led now. Womanlike, she felt a momentary resentment in understanding that her influence was no longer needed, that henceforth she could only attempt to control where had been scope for her to put forth strength to incite.

“It is a strange chance,” she concurred, leaning back from him and steadily returning his gaze.

Again he stood up suddenly—the tumult in his mind was like the conflict of meeting waters, and, momentarily, there came the memory that Steele had made him—Steele, the man true as his name—while he, Sanderson—but what did it matter, for at the end of this journey he might be beyond consequences, and chance had flung this hour at him? Why think of aught but the hour?

“You said—it’s only three days ago—you said that sometimes you found impulse stronger than will, and that you were alone except for me. I wonder——”

He stood in the swaying carriage to speak the words, and looked down at her, but she averted her eyes. This was not the man of three days ago, and, in seeing that the game she had played then was changing to sober earnest, she feared—it was the fear of a thing unknown, such as one might feel in setting foot at night on a hitherto untrodden shore, and in striving vainly to see that which lies in the country beyond. By some instinct Sander-

son divined the fear, and, seating himself beside her again, he went on with a tinge of mockery—

“Can you blame me for wondering what you meant? Or did you think because I’ve lived all my life alone, and cared for nobody but Esther, that you couldn’t waken any feeling by—by such things as you told me? It was safe, you thought, to say them to me. Yet—you’ve made me—your word with Steele has made me what I am. Why?”

The tone, rather than the words, struck deep and found response. Where one of cooler, northern temperament would have paused, perhaps temporised, the tropic intensity of her nature wakened and forced swift answer to the passion underlying his lightly spoken words. “Why?” she echoed—“why?” and the twice-repeated syllable quivered with passionate tenderness. “Because of eight years alone—because I had looked for warmth and found only a kindness I couldn’t understand—because since the day when I first spoke with you—ah!” She broke off with a little catching of her breath which sounded between a laugh and a sob, and leaned toward him. “Is it worth while to tell the rest?”

He grasped her hands and held them. “Tell it, Elma,” he said—“tell it.”

“Because—ah! but I cannot! Why does a river run to the sea, or a flower uncloset at dawn—it was dawn when I met you. Jack—Jack! The funny little name, and the man it means! Rather tell me—why couldn’t you have come to my home, instead of making me wait these years to meet you?”

She withdrew her hand from his grasp, and, reaching up, pushed the hair back from his forehead. Then, half turning and nestling close to him, she drew his face down to the kiss that made him hers. And, grinding against its brakes on a downward incline, the train came to its first stop.

Clasping her hand, Sanderson looked out from the window steadily, intently, until they moved again, when he leaned back beside her, and the tense lines which had come on his face relaxed.

"Supposing—supposing a chance took me away to-morrow—would you regret this?" he asked.

"Regret it?" She laughed at the thought. "Do you think I care so little?"

For answer he drew her close to him, stifled thought of the hour's end with the passion of the hour, knowing nothing but the touch of her and the light which her eyes held. He was powerless, for the time, as a leaf, caught out of a tempest of fear and whirled on a gust of strong desire.

"My bag," she said, at Brayley station. "My bag is in your pocket—Jack."

He took out the bag and handed it to her without looking at it—for the minute he saw only her face. They crossed the footbridge together, and, having waited while she entered her carriage, he began to ascend the hill. As he went up homeward he glanced back along the road from time to time—the passion which had lighted his face died out, gave place to tense lines and quick glances, such as had marked the minutes he spent on Liverpool Street platform. Those who passed by the thatched

cottage in Westwood Lane that afternoon saw him standing in the sitting-room by the window, looking out, watching . . .

As if he thought that the one whom he expected might come at any hour, and, had one observed him closely, as if he expected conflict, and would fight to the end.

There were county people present at Cecilia Stacey's birthday dance, for Mrs. Stacey had been a Chatter before her marriage, and the Chatters were county people who still preserved their standing, although one of Mrs. Stacey's aunts held a hazily defined position, little better than that of lady housekeeper, at one of the great houses a few miles from Brayley. Then, of course, there were present several of Stacey's friends, legal gentlemen, even unto members of the Bar, with hairless skulls polished through much wig-wearing, and airs of learned reticence or intent to cross-examine in an informal way, which not even the nature of this gathering could dispel. And the "tone" of Brayley, carefully selected by Mrs. Stacey, was also present—as the newspaper reporters say.

Mrs. Stacey's editing of the invitations had not enabled her to exclude Frances Wilson, for the lately deceased fire insurance director, Frances' male parent, had stood very high in the social life of Brayley, and it would have been unwise to ignore his wife and daughter—though the former regretfully pleaded indisposition and sent Frances to keep an eye on the proceedings. That gentle damsel appeared in conventional virgin white, as befitted

the juvenility which she had retained through some fifteen summers and winters, and, to comport with her modesty—also to conceal the fact that she was becoming somewhat scraggy in the region of the shoulder blades—with very, very slight *decolletée*. Her complexion—at four-and-sixpence per box—brought forth admiring comments from such as were ignorant of her real age, and on the whole she might with justice be described as one of the successes of the evening, so far as appearances were concerned.

Some there are in Brayley who remember that dance unto this day. The recreation-room was hired by the Staceys in consequence of their lacking suitable accommodation at their own house, and was tastefully decorated for the occasion—again I borrow a phrase from the newspaper reporters. The musicians, hidden among palms hired for the night at two shillings per plant, were not allowed sufficient liquid refreshment to affect the quality of their performance, wherein lies a hint worth taking. Every bed in every inn which the village possessed—there are several, by the way—was taken for the night by one or other of the visitors, though few of those beds were occupied for more than an hour or two. Lastly, it is well (though hardly necessary) to make mention of Sir Theophilus Snobb, the recently knighted mayor of Snobbleigh-on-Sea, who, when that place was a fishing village, had sold whelks at the cottages along the foreshore. Since then, however, he had done some judicious juggling with land, which he bought as agricultural ground and sold as building

plots, thereby achieving prosperity and corpulence, and, incidentally, forgetting all about the wheelks. Being of a litigious nature, he was one of Stacey's best clients : hence the fact of his presence.

There you have the scene and the supers. Now for the actors who, so far as this narrative is in question, enter as principals.

Sanderson arrived early, and, after tendering the conventional congratulations, looked round in search of an opportunity for conversation—once or twice he glanced toward the entrance of the recreation-room, as if he thought the one whom he had expected all day might, by some chance, come here to search for him. This, however, was evidenced only in the first few minutes, for, as nearly as one may judge by his subsequent actions, he put aside thought of that which caused his restlessness, and determined to live in the present only. As on a ship doomed to sink within the hour, and beyond hope of aid, one might abandon himself to the pursuit of every pleasure at hand, and find in that course forgetfulness—so Sanderson fought care by throwing aside all restraint, living as if in truth the hour alone were his, and at its end lay extinction.

With some amusement he observed Frances Wilson, who, having arrived even earlier than himself, sat alone like a spider watching for flies. He made for her, and, regardless of the necessity for an invitation, seated himself beside her.

“Ah, Miss Wilson !” he said, “it's a long time since I had the pleasure of a real good talk with you. Are you engaged for the next dance—it's the second, I think ?”

She confessed, with girlish reluctance, that she was not. Sanderson immediately requested the honour, which was granted. He noted that the dance in question was a waltz.

"Quite an event for the Staceys, this coming-out business. Ah!"—he heaved a mock-sentimental sigh—"how well I remember your birthday party on a similar occasion, Miss Wilson!"

Having forgotten birthdays, long since, the maiden commented diffidently on the beauty of the palms surrounding the musicians' platform.

"Simply splendid," he agreed enthusiastically. "I should think—the gardens must look pretty, too. There's half a moon to see them by."

"Yes, most probably." But she did not take the hint, for he was so unlike his usual self that she failed to grasp it, in addition to which his reference to birthdays had nettled her.

"There's Miss Patmore just come in," he remarked, "and she looks as *passée* as a woman near fifty, though she's not a day over thirty-five. How badly some people wear in comparison with others, Miss Wilson!"

"Do you think so?" The smile with which she asked it betrayed her anger. "Don't you think this place will get rather warm by the time all the guests arrive?"

"Very," he assented. "I rather think you find it too warm now. Shall we go out into the gardens?"

"Oh no! I'm quite cool here," she answered hastily.

"I'm sorry your mother isn't here," he pursued,

looking full at her. "She seems to be so much more interested in me since I became acquainted with the Steeles, and—I know they're coming to-night, so she'll miss seeing me with them."

"But you surely don't imagine such a thing as that would interest my mother?" Frances asked, retaining her smile by an effort, and quivering with wrath.

"I regard her interest as a very high compliment," he answered, almost solemnly. "Everybody in Brayley looks on Mrs. Wilson as—but I'm finding your conversation so interesting that we shall miss our dance unless we go. It's years since we danced together, isn't it?"

He called up many memories, more or less ancient, while they danced, prefacing each with a tenderly uttered, "Do you remember?" One there was which even his reckless audacity of the night could not bring him to speak until he stood before her after the dance, with a chance of instant escape after uttering the words—

"Do you remember how you kissed me and called me Jack, once? I was a little boy in knickers, and you were grown up even then."

Then he turned and fled, without waiting for an answer.

He sat down beside Mrs. Stacey in a pause which occurred in that lady's duties, and encouraged her to talk—a matter of little difficulty and some belief in his own capacity for endurance of her verbosity, since she was as tireless as a gramophone, and, as he expressed it afterward, had an advantage over that instrument in that she

required no winding—to start her was sufficient. He took Mary Stacey, the eldest daughter, out for a walk through the recreation-room grounds, and farther, even unto the foot of the Castle Hill, murmuring sentimental nothings the while. To such an extent did he prolong this excursion that Mrs. Stacey, appreciating his altered position as managing director of a city company, had hopes of him for weeks after that night, and rejoiced inwardly at the thought of getting Mary off her hands—for Mary was somewhat of a handful. He cracked jokes with the vicar, who looked in for a minute to offer his good wishes on this auspicious occasion—I borrow yet more phrasing from the newspaper reporters. He gathered round him a dozen younger people of both sexes in an interval between two dances, and caused explosions of merriment by giving an imitation of Sir Theophilus Snobb, verbose and h-less, in the act of tendering his congratulations to Cecilia Stacey. Wherever he went, he made amusement and interest—but it was erratic amusement, bizarre interest, for he was not the Sanderson whom Brayley knew. The steadiness, the mental control which make a man, had gone, leaving in their place unnatural restlessness and forced gaiety which each hour accentuated. Burrows, who came late and left early, watched him closely for a time.

“You might almost think that he’d bagged the capital belonging to that company of his, and was looking for a chance to bolt with it,” Burrows commented, in his pleasant drawling way.

The Steeles arrived very late, after Burrows,

even. Elma's entrance caused a slight stir about the door, and, seeing that others turned, Sanderson, standing alone for a minute, thrust his hand in his vest pocket, grasping a tiny tabloid, and faced round quickly. Seeing what had caused the movement, he withdrew his hand from his pocket and stood to watch until Elma, seeing him, smiled across at him, when he bowed slightly and smiled in return.

You picture her as she stood talking with her hostess, inches taller than any woman near her, with diamonds—Steele's last birthday gift to her—shining in the masses of her dark hair, and robed in pale, bluish grey, against which her bare shoulders and neck showed darker than ever French or English blood could make them. She had dared the contrast, and the superb lines of her figure, added to the beauty of feature which was hers, made the effect one of regal, arresting charm. There were other women in the room equally tall, others equally well dressed, but they were nothing beside her. Steele, noting the way in which others turned at her entrance, felt a sudden sense of pride in his brilliant wife—had he known it, he had cause for pride in her brilliance alone.

Sir Theophilus Snobb, seeing her for the first time, gasped as if somebody had hit him below the third button of his expansive vest.

“'Eavens!” said Sir Theophilus, remembering transformation scenes in pantomimes. “It's a princess from fairyland!”

Sanderson chatted for a time with Steele, but, save for a chance word or two in passing, did not

speak with Elma until long after supper, which was served in a marquee in the gardens. Then, while a half-dozen or more men stood round her as she rested after a set of lancers, he joined the group and, answering her smile, "The next is mine, I think?" he asked, risking the refusal.

"It is, though in another five minutes I should have yielded to persuasion, and given it elsewhere."

She made room for him on the settee beside her. "Why have you kept away so long?" she asked, when they were comparatively alone. "I have kept dance after dance for you until the last minute."

"Saving pleasure," he answered. "I knew I couldn't have much time with you, so I kept it till last."

The scent which he remembered from a railway journey of four days before was about her now, sweet and strange, and her eyes told things which words could not express. As when he had first known her, he sat almost confused by her beauty. From a little distance Frances Wilson watched them . . .

Then their dance together—if, throughout the night, Sanderson had striven for forgetfulness, he won it now. All that had gone before was nothing, all the things to come were nothing, for in this present was no room for thought of aught but her. As one dreaming he led her to the settee when the music ceased—then, turning, came back to realities with a start at the sight of men and women grouped, as if in alarm, about one seated.

"It's Steele," he said to Elma. "There's something wrong—will you come?"

She took his arm and went with him—the grouped onlookers made way for them, and she knelt beside her husband, who sat, white and faint-looking. Somebody brought a glass of water.

"It's nothing," Steele said weakly, "only a recurrence of heart trouble. I'll be better soon."

Elma looked up. "Our carriage, please—will somebody call for our carriage? We must go home."

Steele shook his head, but two or three had already gone. "I don't want to spoil your pleasure, Elma. I shall be better soon," he objected.

"We must go," she said decidedly. "This is not the first attack, and I couldn't stay, knowing——"

Steele looked up at Sanderson, who stood beside him. "Silly thing for me to do, wasn't it?" he asked, essaying a smile which failed.

"I think Mrs. Steele is quite right," Sanderson answered. "You'll be better at home. If I can be of any use, I shall be very glad to come up with you."

Somebody returned with the intelligence that the carriage was in readiness. Sanderson offered his arm, and Steele, taking it, rose slowly.

"It's very good of you," he said, "and I do feel rather groggy. If you're sure it's no trouble—it is rather a long way up to my room from the carriage, and there'll be nobody about in the house at this hour to give me a hand in getting there."

"I'll be only too pleased to help," Sanderson answered.

Steele gave his other arm to Elma, and the three went out slowly, attended by a score of sympathisers. The first grey line of the early summer dawn had begun to form in the east as they went off, and the night had almost passed when they drove in at the gate of Rockford House, for summer dawns grow swiftly. With Sanderson's aid, and that of his wife, Steele reached his room and lay down on a couch.

"It's very good of you to have come, Sanderson," he said. "My man will drive you back."

"You're sure there's nothing more that I can do—what about a doctor?" Sanderson asked.

"Don't want one—don't want anything that Elma can't get—she and I know how to manage this sort of trouble. I've had it before." He held out his hand—"Good-bye, Sanderson—this is the second good turn you've done me—see you Monday. Elma, run down with him and tell Day to drive him home, will you?"

Sanderson followed her out from the room and down the stairway. In the dusk of the hall she paused, turning toward him—her eyes shone like stars in the half-light, and she leaned forward ever so little, with a tender smile . . . with sudden thought of the coming day, and that which it held, he drew her close to him and kissed her on the lips. For a minute she rested against him.

"Mine!" she whispered; and—"This hour, and one dance—they are all I shall remember of the night."

“Remember, Elma?” He echoed it almost moodily, knowing that only in such minutes as this could he cease to remember.

“Always,” she whispered back, wreathing her arms round him, reluctant to let him go. “But I shall want more memories, yet!”

CHAPTER X

SATURDAY

HAVING reached his home, Sanderson stood for a long time before the window in his sitting-room, looking out at the slowly reddening splendour of the east, and the haze-veiled slope of country between him and the horizon. The world was still—no leaf moved of all that he saw, save when some bird, flying out, disturbed the twigs, and no man-made sound came, after the wheels of Steele's carriage had ceased to echo on the road, to fret or beat against the quiet of the new day. One sound, and that almost a part of the great peace which surrounded him, he heard : the ceaseless chorus of song from many birds, which began the day with praise to Him who gave it.

There came to Sanderson a knowledge of the futility of his restless, reckless actions in the eighteen hours just passed. Time marched on, steadily, and each minute brought its appointed event—he had achieved no definite result out of all that he had done, except that for some minutes of the time he had been able to forget, only to be spurred again, and still more sharply, by remembrance. Now, reflecting quietly, he knew that

he might as well attempt to delay the sun's rising as to control the events of the near future—with that thought the sun's first ray smote across the world from a bank of gold and amethyst-purple cloud, and fell on the valley before him ; a little dawn-breeze rustled the trees about him, and, far off, a cock crowed. In place of his restlessness came passivity, and the grim setting of will with which a strong man might await the defeat he could not avert.

When the sun showed full and clear above its bed of cloud he turned away, bathed, dressed for the day, and busied himself over an experiment by which he wished to determine the rust-resisting properties, under various conditions, of certain qualities of iron—for he had no desire for sleep. Later, the old woman who prepared his meals and acted as housemaid for him came in, and he sat down to breakfast with a book beside him. The period in which he had allowed his will to relax utterly was followed by sharp reaction, full self-control, and for the time he was able to say that he would not think, would not anticipate. Having finished breakfast, he returned to his experiment with the iron, at which he worked, quietly and steadily, until after ten o'clock. Then at a sound from without the house he looked up—if his nerves had been steady before, they were rigid now, and the firm setting of his lips showed that he made ready, without fear, for the event which he had anticipated since noon of the preceding day.

Somebody opened the little wooden gate, came up the flower-bordered path, and knocked. With

his right hand in his pocket Sanderson crossed the sitting-room, very deliberately, and opened the door. A tall, clean-shaven man, powerfully built, and dressed in inconspicuous grey, stood without.

"Well?" Sanderson queried.

"Mr. Sanderson?" the stranger asked in reply.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"I understand, Mr. Sanderson, that you came down from London yesterday by the twelve twenty-seven from Liverpool Street, and that you have not left Brayley since?"

"Quite correct," he answered coolly, "though I don't see how those items can interest you. You have an advantage over me, too, in that you know my name."

"I am Inspector Mackinnon, of the C.I.D.—I have come down from London to make a few inquiries, and you may be able to assist me, perhaps."

"Ah!" He stood back from the door. "Come in, inspector."

Mackinnon entered. Sanderson pointed him to a chair, and—he hesitated only a second, but to Sanderson it was a long age of waiting—then he sat down. Sanderson took his hand from his pocket, and, drawing a deep breath, seated himself with a table between him and his visitor.

"I'm quite willing to assist you all I can," he remarked, "but I have no idea of the reason for your coming to me."

Mackinnon leaned forward and looked him squarely in the face. "What was John Orme to

you ? ” he asked, as if the question, flung out unexpectedly, would decide a point.

“ Mr. Orme is my friend,” Sanderson answered quietly, and accenting the prefix.

Ten times the clock on the mantel ticked, and each tick marked a separate eternity of suspense. Would that watchful, unemotional man never speak again ?

“ And you were here, after noon, for the whole of yesterday—you can prove it ? ”

“ My housekeeper can help me to prove it—she’s in the house, and I’ll call her if you wish it. But what——”

Mackinnon held up his hand, and interrupted—
“ No, don’t call her—your word is sufficient, Mr. Sanderson. I must beg your pardon for these questions and the way I’m putting them, but I’ve not come to you in an official capacity, exactly. I think you may be able to throw some light on what looks like developing into a delicate and difficult matter, and—well, you may regard anything you may say as absolutely between ourselves. The fact that I have called on you, or that you have said anything, need never be known without your wish—sir.” He added the title as if by an afterthought.

Sanderson got up, produced a whisky bottle, a soda syphon, and two glasses. “ Go on, inspector,” he said quietly ; “ this sounds interesting. I take it that you’ll have a peg ? ”

“ Well, it’s rather early in the day, but——”
He helped himself to a small peg. Sanderson filled his own tumbler a third of the way up with whisky,

added a tablespoonful or thereabouts of soda water, and drank. Mackinnon noted that his hand was steady as his actions were cool and deliberate.

"Good health, sir." He drank, and set his tumbler down. "Yes, a difficult matter, and likely to puzzle a few of us. I judge that you've not seen the morning papers?"

"I have not," Sanderson answered. "I make a point of going to London five days a week, and for the other two I trouble nothing at all about what goes on outside my garden gate."

The inspector nodded. "You called on Mr. John Orme some time yesterday morning, I think, Mr. Sanderson?" he asked, in a friendly manner.

"I did—but I should like to know how you found it out."

"It is our business to find out things, sir, any way we can," and he smiled. "Could you remember the time of your call on Mr. Orme?"

"I should judge it to be somewhere between eleven and a quarter to twelve," Sanderson answered reflectively. "I came straight from Baker Street in a taxi to catch my train down here. But before this business goes any further I want to know what my friend Orme has been doing?"

"That's just what I should like to know," Mackinnon answered, in a thoughtful way.

"Well," Sanderson said, seeing that his visitor did not intend to explain more fully, "all I can tell you is that he arrived back from the States, where his employers had sent him for six weeks

—he's a newspaper man, as I suppose you know ? ”

“ Yes, I knew that,” Mackinnon answered. “ When did he arrive back ? ”

“ He reached London on Thursday night—at least, I believe that was the first night he spent at his rooms in Innis Place after his return.”

“ And you saw him at those rooms, in Innis Place ? ”

“ I did, yesterday morning. But—you've asked me a good many questions, inspector, and told me nothing. Why—what have you come to me to learn ? ”

“ I come to you because, so far, Mr. Sanderson, you are the last man I can find who saw John Orme alive.”

Sanderson leaned back in his chair and stared. “ Eh ? ” he said, as if he had not fully understood.

Mackinnon bent forward, watching closely, resting his arms on the table, and made every word that he spoke distinct and separate. “ At twenty minutes past five yesterday afternoon John Orme was shot dead in his rooms in Innis Place,” he said, “ and I'm looking for the man who shot him.”

Sanderson started up as he sat. “ Good God ! ” he said, in an awestruck way. Mackinnon leaned back from the table, satisfied.

“ That is so, Mr. Sanderson, and I want to know what happened in Innis Place between the time you left those rooms and twenty minutes past five. You were in Brayley at that time, so, even if I had been inclined to suspect you, that puts you right out of court, at once. Now—do you know of

any one who could have a reason—who owed Mr. Orme a grudge ? ”

Sanderson shook his head. “No more than I owe him one myself,” he said ; “he was not the man to make enemies. I’ve known him a little over two years, and always found that he made friends more quickly than I could. He was the sort of man who gets liked—everybody’s favourite, one might say.”

“And you left the place before twelve o’clock ? ”

“I did not note the time, but I came straight to Liverpool Street and caught the twelve twenty-seven down here.”

Mackinnon nodded. Sanderson emptied his glass and mixed himself a second and equally stiff peg. The crisis was over, but he feared reaction.

Another knock came at the door. Sanderson rose to open it, and took in a note. “Excuse me,” he said to Mackinnon, and read the note.

“From the lady who came down with me yesterday,” he explained ; “she can help me in proving the time I left London if you think it necessary, but I should prefer that she——”

“It is not necessary,” Mackinnon interrupted, smiling in a comprehending way. “I have seen the collector who answered a question of yours at Liverpool Street, and who knows you, as well as seeing the collector at this end. That point needs no further proof.”

“I should not like her name mentioned.”

“And you know of nobody ? ” Mackinnon asked, watching in an odd way, as if a suspicion

still lingered in his mind that Sanderson had not told all.

"Not a soul who could have the slightest reason. You don't—you don't suspect burglars?"

"Fourteen sovereigns lay in an open drawer of his roll-top desk, untouched."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't help," Sanderson remarked, "though if any other information I possess, such as details of Orme's life and habits, should be of use——" He paused, indicating by his manner willingness to assist in any way which might be suggested.

Inspector Mackinnon rose. "Thank you, Mr. Sanderson. You'll understand, sir, that I came down here, in case you shouldn't be at your office on Monday, to tell you that you'll be wanted at the inquest on Monday afternoon. You'll get a formal notification at your office Monday morning, to attend and give evidence if wanted."

"I understand," Sanderson answered.

"And that I—well, I have not discussed the affair with you."

Sanderson smiled. "I understand, perfectly, and you may rely on me," he said.

"Thank you, sir." He moved toward the door. "I'm half inclined to think the key to this puzzle will be found in the States, where Mr. Orme spent his last six weeks."

"Possibly," Sanderson agreed. He saw Mackinnon out, and watched him close the garden gate from the outside. Then, returning to his seat, he poured out half a tumbler of neat whisky, drank it, and sat for awhile with his head propped

between his hands. From time to time he shuddered, like one wakening from an evil dream. From first to last the interview had been a matter of touch and go, and he knew it.

At last he remembered the note he had received. "On an urgent matter, at once," he muttered, quoting its contents, and, rising, he took a hat and stick and went out. Choosing a path across some fields, he walked over to Rockford House in a little over a half-hour. He could have reached his destination by the road in twenty minutes—but Inspector Mackinnon, of the C.I.D., had passed along that road recently, and Sanderson had no desire to meet him again until a real necessity, from his point of view, arose.

Elma Steele stood waiting on the threshold of Rockford House as he came up from the entrance gate. "Will you come in?" she asked, regarding him in a curious, intent way. "I wrote to you because I want—I want to speak with you."

Without answering he followed her to the drawing-room and stood, waiting. She did not offer him a seat, but faced him, and rested one hand on a little table against the door.

"Have you seen this morning's paper?" she asked. "A London paper, I mean."

"I—I have not." He found some difficulty in answering.

She looked at him with evident irresolution. "It is about my bag—the bag you carried for me yesterday. The sweets did get squashed in your pocket, after all, and—I found something—two things—sticking to them. I didn't know

—until a few minutes before — when I wrote you——”

“I know,” he answered, speaking more easily and noting her increasing agitation. “You found——”

“No !” —the interruption was almost a cry—
“I will not hear—I will know nothing ! You shall take the two things from the bag yourself, and I will forget that I ever saw them.”

“That is as you wish,” he answered indifferently. Having faced out Inspector Mackinnon, he found it comparatively easy to face her.

“Only—tell me”—she forced the words out—
“what was John Orme to you ?”

“Since you say you will know nothing—he was my friend.”

“Your friend ?” she echoed, leaning back on the table and staring at him. “Then——”

“No, you are quite right,” and he smiled slightly. “John Orme was my friend, and Esther—was my sister.”

“Ah !” It was a sob of relief. “I knew you would not—but I could not understand. And I see——”

Sanderson waited, but she did not explain the half-expressed thoughts. “I am in your hands,” he said.

She made a gesture expressive of dissent. “I know nothing,” she answered—“nothing !”

“But—I should like you to know this—John Orme merited death. For six weeks I have carried Esther’s last letter to me, written the night before she—died. She wrote it—she would not live to

face even me, whom she loved, to tell what that letter told. Whoever shot John Orme carried out justice where the law had no power. And this—remember that I have said this—God do so to me, and more, if ever I wrong a woman and desert her as he did ! ”

His voice vibrated with passionate feeling as he ended, and his right hand upraised above his head made an oath of the last words. Elma pushed the door with her foot so that it closed.

“ Do you think I blame you ? ” she asked gently. “ Don’t you know, Jack—Jack—oh, you man I didn’t wait for !—I would have bidden you, helped you—and now I tell you as you told me—that his death was just ! ”

“ And so you guessed that——”

“ No ”—again she interrupted—“ I tell you that I know nothing—nothing ! I will get the bag, and you shall take what you will from it. I have forgotten what it was that I found, already.”

He laid his hand on her arm as she stepped forward to carry out her expressed intention. “ No,” he said, “ keep them, Elma. Whom should I trust, if not you ? Let it be our secret.”

She leaned toward him, looking up at him as if she would know what lay behind such an offer. “ Is it—is it because you care ? ” she asked very softly.

“ Elma ”—he caught her hands and drew her close to him—“ did you know that, too ? ”

“ I will keep them, and it shall be our secret,” she said, smiling as she lay in his arms. “ We will never speak of it again, but I shall know that you trusted them to me. Our secret ! ” She

repeated it wonderingly, as if there were in the words a great, desired meaning, and she alone had found it.

Again Sanderson knew nothing beyond the hour—the woman enthralled him, the intoxicating passion of the present made the past of no account and the future a thing worth facing only for the hours which would include her presence. Holding her, looking into her eyes, he knew that here was release from thought in desire, and in the overriding, memory-mastering sense which might be gained by such abandonment of will and reason as that of which her eyes told now. In that knowledge was the shaping of his fate, and, standing thus with her, he drank, as it were, of a cup whose sweetness seemed greater than that of all else in life, and, drinking, gave no thought to the awakening which should come with cessation of its drugging, binding power.

“I had thought my best days over, and they are all to come, through you,” she whispered, smiling.

“And I——” Grasping her shoulders, he held her back from him that he might see her face. “With you I claim mine, Elma.”

Footsteps sounded from beyond the door, and he started—it was only a servant, but the noise brought him back to face realities. “I must go home,” he said. “This—this matter of Orme’s death is not ended until after the inquest, on Monday. I must attend that.”

“There are—there is nothing else—no other trace?” she asked hesitatingly.

“None—nothing but the two you keep.”

“You are sure? Think—is there nothing else? I must not lose you, now.”

He smiled reassuringly. “You shall not lose me, Elma. I know—this morning made decision. After Monday all need for thought of it will be over.”

“And then?” She bent toward him, smiling wonderfully—she looked like an embodied temptation. “And then?” she repeated, almost in a whisper.

Sanderson caught her in his arms and held her. “Then—our best days, Elma,” he answered.

Again a step in the hall without the room. He drew back and turned to go. “I shall come down by the noon train on Tuesday,” he said. “We can arrange then, if you will.”

She nodded, and laughed. In the room above them Steele slept dreamlessly. Sanderson turned and went out, homeward.

As he walked, his oath of a few minutes before recurred to him—so far had he changed from the man of six weeks before that he saw no inconsistency in himself. He regarded the words as a promise which he would remember and keep, always.

Then, contentedly—“Yes, it was justice and no more—just, Esther, because of you.”

But it is doubtful whether Esther would have agreed with him if she could have heard.

There followed, on the multitude of conflicting emotions which Sanderson had experienced in the past twenty-four hours, a period of utter prostration. In addition to the strain which that time

had placed on him was the fact that he had missed a night's sleep ; and, on reaching home after his visit to Rockford House, he lay down on his bed and fell into a sort of stupor, in which act after act of his own in the crowded hours just ended struck on his brain and rebounded, as it were, without leaving any impression. Will and energy, having lasted just sufficiently to carry him through, failed utterly now—had Inspector Mackinnon come in at that time Sanderson would not have troubled to move, for nothing mattered ; the passing of the crisis left every faculty inert.

Then came sleep, sound and dreamless, and lasting until Sunday's dawn, when, fully dressed and wondering at it, he wakened to question, during the few seconds which were required for realisation of the immediate past, why he should lie here in such a manner ?

CHAPTER XI

THE INNIS PLACE MYSTERY

THE gentlemen of the jury having been sworn, the coroner commenced his inquiry into the circumstances attendant on the death of John Orme, of 7 Innis Place. The first witness called was Mrs. Amelia Bragg, housekeeper at 7 Innis Place, which was let out in flats of two, three, or more rooms each, to various tenants. Mrs. Bragg testified to seeing Mr. Orme on the morning of the tragedy, when she took his breakfast in to him. There was an arrangement between her and Mr. Orme by which she provided him with breakfast and a light supper—she emphasised its lightness—at such times as he was in residence at Innis Place. He took no other meals in his rooms. He was often away for days and weeks at a time, and she had understood him to say that he was a newspaper man, on the staff of the *Morning*. Mrs. Bragg was inclined to be somewhat newsy and communicative of abundant detail, without regard to its relevance or point, in her manner of answering such questions as the coroner put to her.

At half-past nine, as nearly as she could tell, on the preceding Friday night, she had gone to Mr.

Orme's room, of which, as housekeeper, she possessed a key, to lay the usual light supper in readiness for his return. On entering the room and turning up the electric light, she was struck all of a heap, as you might say, by seeing Mr. Orme lying on his back in the middle of the room, with his head toward the door. A little occasional table was lying overturned beside him, and many papers were scattered about the floor. She screamed and ran out, and called her husband, who, after visiting the room, went for a policeman. Neither she nor her husband touched anything in the room, except the electric light switch—oh! and she forgot to say that she saw blood on the carpet where Mr. Orme was lying, down by his right—no, it was against his left side.

Questioned by a juryman, she had heard no suspicious sounds before she went to the room—wasn't likely to, for Mr. Orme's rooms were at the end of a corridor on the first floor—yes, No. 7th was a large house and well she knew it, trampin' up and down them stairs all day and half the night. The rooms next to Mr. Orme's and those opposite, across the corridor, were unoccupied—had been so for a month or more, both sets of 'em. The house was let out in unfurnished flats to single gentlemen who had business in the city. So far as she knew, Mr. Orme was not acquainted with any of the other tenants, he was away such a lot. By "a lot" she meant that he was away quite half his time, and on the Thursday night before his death he had arrived back from New York after an absence of nearly six weeks. He was a nice, quiet gentleman, and

never gave no trouble more than he could help. As for enemies, she didn't believe he'd ever hurt a fly. On Friday morning she had seen a Mr. Sanderson go to Mr. Orme's rooms—Mr. Sanderson was a friend of Mr. Orme's, and often called when he (Orme) was in London.

The inquiring and intelligent juryman having assuaged his thirst for information, Mrs. Bragg was permitted to retire.

Alfred James Bragg, the husband of the preceding witness, was called next. He stated that, just after half-past nine on the evening in question, his wife came blattin' to him in a terrible fright, with her eyes stickin' out of her face as big as door-knobs, and told him that there 'ad been a norrible tragedy 'appened on the first floor. He went up, and found Mr. Orme lying on his back with his head toward the door. He (witness) knew that Mr. Orme was dead. Questioned as to how he knew, he said gloomily that he had seen dead men afore, and had been nigh on seven year an 'orspital porter. He corroborated his wife's evidence with regard to the overturned occasional table and scattered papers, adding that a roll-top desk beside the window was open, and two or three of its drawers had been pulled out and left on the flap. He switched off the light, closed the door—it was secured by a spring lock—and in company with his wife, who stuck to him like a limpet, he went out and informed the first policeman he could find of the tragedy. That first policeman happened to be passing down Innis Place at the time, and was not fifty yards from No. 7.

Mrs. Bragg, recalled, said that there were two keys to Mr. Orme's rooms, one of which was always in his (Orme's) possession, while she kept the other. The key she kept was produced for inspection, and proved to be of the American latch pattern, like a small knife blade with a deep longitudinal groove on each side, and with many wards. The makers guaranteed that no two locks were alike, and it would be impossible to duplicate the key produced without taking some form of impression from it.

P.C. Knowles, next in order among the witnesses, deposed to having gone with Mr. and Mrs. Bragg to the first floor of No. 7, where he unlocked a door with a key which Mrs. Bragg gave him, and turned on the electric light just inside the door. Bragg and his wife, who were both very much frightened (Bragg glared at the constable for that), seemed incapable of doing anything. Having ascertained that there was no life in the body—it was quite cold by this time—and that there was nobody in either of Orme's two rooms or in his bathroom, the constable locked the door and went out to the nearest telephone call office, where he called up his headquarters. He then returned to No. 7, remaining there on guard over the body until the arrival of Inspector Mackinnon, who brought with him a surgeon and two men. At this point P.C. Knowles retired, and Inspector Mackinnon took up the story.

Mackinnon, having been sworn, told of his examination of the body, which lay, as Bragg had testified, on its back, with the head toward the door. There were two bullet wounds. One of these had been caused by a bullet which, before

entering the body, had struck the winding stem of Orme's watch, fixing it so that one could neither wind the watch nor adjust the hands, while the shock consequent on the impact of the bullet had shattered the mainspring and hairspring, and had cracked the glass of the watch into six or seven pieces, none of which, however, had fallen out. It was thus an obvious fact that, after the watch had stopped, the position of the hands could not have been altered either by means of the winding stem or by opening the front of the case, since, had the latter been attempted, one or more piece of the broken glass must have fallen out. The hands of the watch pointed to twenty minutes past five, which was, almost certainly, the time at which the shot that struck the winding stem had been fired.

The inquiring juryman asked Mackinnon what grounds he had for assuming that the watch had been in motion at the time the bullet struck it, since, if there were any likelihood of its being stopped, its value as evidence would be destroyed. Mackinnon asked leave to call another witness with respect to that point.

Franz Willem Schwab, works foreman in the firm of Rust & Son, gold and silversmiths and high-class jewellers and watchmaker, gave evidence to the effect that Mackinnon had brought the watch to him that morning, asking him certain questions regarding it. The watch had been manufactured by his firm, and had left the works about fourteen months before. It was a gold lever, sold retail at twenty guineas, and having passed through the

usual trade channels, could not have been in the deceased's possession for more than a year. (Usually, retailers kept only one of that class of watch in stock, ordering another only on selling the one they had.) Witness had subjected the watch to a minute examination, and stated definitely that it had been in perfect going order at the time the bullet struck it, and had not been allowed to run down without rewinding, or the mainspring would not have broken. Further, after the impact of the bullet it would be impossible to alter the position of the hands by the winding stem, for that had been rendered immovable, and, as the preceding witness had said, nobody but a skilled watchmaker with proper tools could have opened the front case to alter the hands, without having displaced some of the broken glass—and even with proper tools it would be a risky business. Microscopic examination had showed that, in all probability, the front case of the watch—that in which the glass was fixed—had never been opened since the watch left its makers' warehouse.

The coroner commented that no man ever carried a watch about with him after it had stopped—he either took it to be repaired or laid it aside. It might therefore be concluded that this shot was fired at about twenty minutes past five, allowing that the watch was a little fast or a little slow—most men kept their watches a few minutes ahead of the correct time.

Inspector Mackinnon, recalled, said that a second shot had struck the deceased quite near the one which stopped the watch, in the region of the

heart, and had evidently been fired at a distance of less than a yard, since the powder which drove it had, on exploding, blackened the deceased's vest at the spot where the bullet entered the body. This shot, apparently fired after the other, had been fired while the deceased lay on the floor, since it was subsequently found embedded in the planking under the body. Both bullets were identical in weight and calibre, and were of the pattern used mostly with a .32 calibre automatic pistol. Witness had made careful search for the empty cartridge shells, but they were not to be found. At this point Sanderson, waiting his turn as witness, looked interested, though Saturday's paper had mentioned the calibre of the weapon used and the fact that the two empty cartridge shells had not been found.

Mackinnon detailed what he found in the dead man's pockets—items of no importance—and then he came to the overturned occasional table. Orme had probably picked it up by the leg to defend or shield himself, since one bullet, evidently the first, had passed through the thin, polished walnut top. It might be taken that Orme had been holding the table in front of him when that shot was fired. Except for the position in which the table was found, there were no signs of a struggle. Referring to the watch again, in answer to a question by the intelligent jurymen, Mackinnon could not say whether it had been removed from and replaced in Orme's pocket before he (witness) touched it.

Examination of the rooms revealed a thorough search on the part of the assailant or a possible

accomplice—or both—for papers of some kind. The roll-top desk, already mentioned, had been ransacked ; Orme's two trunks and his portmanteau, lying open in his bedroom, had been emptied and their contents thoroughly investigated ; a litter of paper of all kinds was scattered about the floors of both rooms. In the bathroom Mackinnon had found a half-burnt wax match, together with some charred fragments of paper which had been reduced almost to powder by being trodden on. One fragment was recognisable as belonging to the back of an envelope at the point where the paper overlaps. It was good paper, of the tint known as "Silurian Grey," and had contained no writing whatever.

Mackinnon retired, and the surgeon who had examined the body followed him. The first shot, the surgeon said, had been deflected by striking a rib, and had passed upward, severing a small artery and travelling toward the right shoulder, where it lodged in the muscles in a way which would render the right arm totally useless. In spite of the extent of its course—almost across the body—it had not been sufficient to cause death, but, in the opinion of the witness, the pain and shock resulting from it would be of such a nature that Orme, on being struck by it, would fall to the floor within the minute. The second shot, passing through the heart, would cause death instantaneously. Witness had made a detailed post-mortem examination. The deceased had not been a strong man, physically, and there were unmistakable evidences of vicious living—the witness

went into details of a pathological nature, which need not be followed here, and with these his evidence concluded.

John Glyn Sanderson, residing at Westwood Lane, Brayley, and managing director in the firm of Sanderson and Steele, marine composition manufacturers, stated that he had become acquainted with the deceased a little over two years previously. Deceased had come to him on behalf of the *Morning* newspaper to obtain information respecting a marine preservative paint which he (witness) had invented, and a short paragraph describing the qualities of the paint had subsequently appeared in the *Morning*. The acquaintance thus commenced had developed into friendship, and witness had, up to a year ago, been in the habit of accompanying the deceased, at times, on various missions which the latter undertook in the interests of his paper. The deceased had also stayed four days with witness at Brayley—that was nearly eighteen months ago—but during the past year they had not met so frequently, as the deceased had gone on longer excursions in his capacity of press representative, and had spent more time away. Witness objected to the description of the deceased as a man of vicious living, for he could say from personal knowledge——

The coroner, interrupting, said that the medical evidence was irrefutable.

The intelligent juryman asked if anything were known about the deceased's relatives. Witness could give no information, and knew of no relatives. He knew that the deceased had served in the

South African War, had subsequently taken a post with the *Cape Standard*, and had come home less than three years before and got his appointment on the staff of the *Morning*. Beyond that, the witness knew nothing—Orme had never spoken in his hearing about any relatives or home ties.

Continuing his evidence, witness said that during either the first or second week of June the deceased had informed him that he was going to New York in the interests of his paper, and that he would be in London again on the last Thursday in July. He (Sanderson) had mentioned that he anticipated the result of his test of the marine paint shortly, and they had talked over the possibilities of the paint. Deceased had manifested keen interest in the invention, and had asked Sanderson to let him know the result of the test as soon as possible after he (Orme) had returned from New York. In consequence of this request, witness had called on deceased at 7 Innis Place, on Friday morning of the week just ended, and had told him of the formation of the company following on the successful nature of the invention, as proved by his test of it. Deceased had congratulated him on his good fortune, and they had agreed to spend the following Wednesday evening together in London—deceased had passes for a theatre. As witness had intended to catch the twelve twenty-seven from Liverpool Street that Friday, he had not spent much time with deceased, but had left Innis Place, as nearly as he could tell, at about ten minutes to twelve. He had not seen anybody about the corridors or loitering outside, either on entering or leaving—he

had noticed nobody but the housekeeper, who had passed him on the stairs as he was leaving the house. Not far from Baker Street station he had hailed a passing taxi, and had been driven straight to Liverpool Street.

Questioned by the coroner, he judged the duration of his stay with the deceased at about half an hour. He had left his own office at a quarter to eleven that morning, and approximated his arrival at Innis Place at a quarter past eleven. Questioned by the intelligent juryman, he said that he had gone home to Brayley by the twelve twenty-seven, in company with a friend who could, if necessary, testify to his arrival at Liverpool Street and departure by that train. He had not left Brayley again until he came up to London this (Monday) morning, a fact which could be proved by the evidence of several people, if necessary. Inspector Mackinnon, looking at the coroner, made a slight motion implying dissent, and the coroner said he did not think that evidence would be required.

The witness further stated that the deceased had been in his usual health and spirits when he (Sanderson) called at Innis Place on Friday—there had been no appearance of anything which could in any way be connected with the tragedy. Nobody, so far as he knew, bore any feeling of enmity toward the deceased, who had been a man of cheerful, pleasant disposition, and not likely to make enemies anywhere.

The managing editor of the *Morning* gave evidence of Orme's position on the staff of the paper, of the time at which he had reported himself

at the office on his return from New York, and of his disposition, which was cheery and energetic, and ability, which had won him recognition in the form of quick promotion. The evidence was at once valueless and uninteresting.

Mrs. Bragg, recalled a second time, did not know if Mr. Orme had gone out at all between the time of Sanderson's departure from Innis Place and twenty minutes past five in the afternoon. The windows of Mr. Orme's rooms were at the back of the house, and looked out on a dead wall. No, she hadn't heard no pistols fired, and she hadn't heard of nobody what had heard pistols fired on Friday. She minded her own business, she did, and what about her expenses as a witness ?

The coroner, addressing the jury, recapitulated the main feature of the evidence, and pointed out that, though Sanderson was the last person known to have seen Orme alive, the evidence of the watch showed that Sanderson was forty miles away at the time the first shot was fired, and, although that evidence was not absolutely beyond question, it appeared to be pretty convincing, in his opinion. The summing up as a whole was little more than a condensed recital of the evidence, for, not knowing what cards the police might have up their sleeves, the coroner gave practically no indications of his own view of the matter—except for that comment on the evidence of the watch—and left the jury to decide, almost uninfluenced, on their verdict.

For thirty-five minutes the twelve men deliberated, and up to the end of that time Sanderson sat motionless, waiting apathetically. A close observer

might have said that he had grown perceptibly older since noon of the preceding Friday.

The jury concluded their discussion, and, through their foreman, returned a verdict of "Wilful Murder" against "Some Person or Persons Unknown."

CHAPTER XII

ON THE HEATH

HE found himself on an empty, windy slope of Hampstead Heath, though how he had come there he did not know. The cool wind was refreshing, after the warmth and stuffiness of the room in which he had waited—was it thirty-five minutes or thirty-five years that he had waited? For a time he stood looking at the only tree which grew on the slope, a young elm whose branches waved in the wind.

He understood that he must have walked through many streets—yes, he must have walked, for his boots and trousers were splashed with mud. There must have been rain, too, at some time since his leaving the room in which the inquest had been held, for his clothes were damp. But he could not remember when or where the rain had fallen, and there was clear sky and sun, now—a low-hung sun, reddening to its setting.

He could not realise, although he understood, that he had walked to his present position, but felt rather that many streets had passed by him in succession. They were all alike, these streets, all filled with the faces of men and women—a very

haze of faces, and each one, he knew, concealed a secret behind the interest in everyday things which it expressed. As—as John Orme had concealed a secret behind his cheery, pleasant ways and the smile with which he met men. Yes, they were all alike—he looked upward and cursed the human race, not less fiercely because silently.

A youth and girl, lovers, came over the crest of the slope and saw him standing there alone, and at the sound of the girl's voice he turned toward them. They saw his fierce, set face, paused irresolutely, and turned away again. The girl had been laughing as they came over the rise, but after his turning toward them the sound of her laugh ceased. Soon, except for figures of men and women in the distance, he was alone again.

Many faces, and each hiding its secret. All had secrets to hide. Even Esther, whom he had loved, had had her secret, and it had killed her—but John Orme's death had cancelled that. He recalled Mackinnon's evidence concerning the way in which Orme had tried to shield himself with the table; he pictured Orme lying, alive and helpless, while the pistol was placed within a yard of his heart, and the second shot fired. What an eternity of suspense that last minute of life must have been for Orme! What a hell of torture he must have suffered!

And he, Jack Sanderson, who also had lived through hells of suspense in the past four days, looked upward again, and laughed, glad that this thing had been, glad at picturing the minutes which Orme had had in which to realise and fear approaching death.

But the faces in the streets—again his thoughts reverted to the slowly^{ly} moving, unending procession. There were some faces lit with smiles, some eager and expressive of strong purpose, some rasped by time into sad lines, some marked by other causes than time . . . and the secrets they concealed, the absolute falseness of humanity, the knowledge which was his, at last, that no man was what he seemed, or worthy of trust! Why, he himself had his secret, now—but he hugged the knowledge that all others had theirs, for with that knowledge his own secret could never be a burden.

Many faces . . . and, see! the ever-moving procession came effortless up the slope before him—he saw the changing types. A mist of faces, laughing, earnest, sad, careless—they came on, they were about him as in the streets—he heard the murmur of voices, the newsboys shouting—what was it that they shouted? He listened intently, and the imagined sound resolved itself—“Innis Place Mystery—Inquest!” And that girl there, the girl with the pure face, was talking of the surgeon’s evidence as she drifted past him up the slope—she had her secret, too, or she would not have known. . . . What could a face like hers hide?

Fancies, all fancies, and bodiless ghosts which a wave of his hand dispersed, in spite of their nearness to reality! The red half of sun which still showed told him that it was long since he had come out on the heath—but how long, and what was time, for he had lived many ages in what men would call three days? Now, careless of the wet grass and

of the fact that his own clothing was already rain soaked, he sat down on the ground to watch the sunset.

Many faces—until twilight came on the fancy clung to him, and he sat still, watching the imaginary host which always moved and changed before him. Then, very gradually, the impression passed, until out of all the host there remained but one face. It evolved slowly from a mass of phantoms on either side and above and beneath it, attendant visions which, receding slowly, left distinct and clear a vision of the face of William Steele.

Sanderson drew himself up as he sat, like one preparing for a mental conflict. An inner sense told him that he was near on madness, but he would not heed it. He had an account to square with this face which was left from all that had obsessed him—its eyes told him that they knew his secret, and now he must do battle for the future. If only he had known the secret which those eyes concealed, he might have fought on even terms. But he did not know it—yet it must exist, for every man had one thing which he kept hidden. Orme, apparently so sure a friend, had proved that.

It was Steele whom he must fight, but it was more, for Steele knew nothing, while this face which looked out from the twilight was that of one who knew all. Sanderson stared vindictively—had he won thus far to lose now, since he did not know what it was that Steele kept hidden? There *must* be something—for, if there were nothing, then he, Sanderson, could not justify himself.

Yes, there must be something—again he remembered Orme, and laughed.

“What harm?” he asked of this more than Steele.
“Since he can never know—what harm?”

“He has made you,” the face made answer,
“and now you would unmake all his life.”

“I saved his life.”

“You would take more—more than you saved to him.”

“What of him, and of that which his life hides? With this knowledge which is mine, shall I consider or spare any man? Somewhere, hidden, is some act of his. . . .”

“What is that to you—will the wrong done by you cancel any other?”

“It will repay, and so become justified.”

“No man may say that he will repay, for every act repays itself. Evil, it is its own punishment, and good, its own reward.”

“Who shall judge between evil and good?” and to himself it was as if he laughed in derision, though a chance passer-by saw only a man sitting immobile in the gathering darkness.

“None need judge,” the face made answer, “for all know—there is that within each man which makes him his own judge.”

“Then I stand justified, for in my own sight I have done good, not evil.”

“Let the act, which is its own reward, tell if that be so. For the future, remember that he made you.”

“And the woman—what of her? I cannot draw back.”

“Better to draw back now, while the chance remains, than to go on in this. For now the chance has not quite gone, and the woman’s life is her own—it shall bring its own reward.”

“I will not!” The face shrank back and grew faint at his intensity—it was as if the words were blows, driving it away. “I will not—because of the woman—Elma—I have promised, and I will fulfil!”

Then the face was gone, and suddenly he knew that the whole scene was but a fantasy evolved from an overwrought mind. With weariness came sanity.

Yet memory of the waking dream remained, and he knew it for an attempt to silence the one question which remained in his mind. He knew that he must choose between two evils, but desire, guiding, told him that in retraction lay the greater of the two. Steele would never know; Elma wanted him, for she had said that her best days were to come, through him—and he himself felt that he was drawn to her, with her could find forgetfulness and rest from thought, happiness . . . the time of awakening and reason was not yet, for the fascination of the woman blinded him.

But that better self, which had taken the semblance of William Steele’s face, would not yield without a struggle. There were hours in which he paced back and forth along the crest of the grassy slope, determined to justify his own acts and silence the accusing voice within himself. Hours of fierce fighting, not least among the influences which made those days so momentous

for him, and always, when he would have drawn back, the memory of Elma's face came to bid him go forward—forward to her.

Again, not knowing that he walked, he went through many streets—to him it was as if the streets passed by him without effort of his own. At first there were crowds beneath the lights, but as he walked the streets grew empty save for policemen and the army of men who clean London by night. On and on, unconsciously finding relief in movement, and neither knowing nor caring whither—until the light of early dawn roused him to the fact that he had passed the whole night without sleep, and then he looked round, realised his surroundings. He saw Big Ben towering before him, and soft, tender light reflecting from the polluted waters of the Thames—his last consciousness of time and place had been of sunset and Hampstead Heath, while now he stood on Westminster Bridge, and it was dawn.

Dawn! "It was dawn when I met you," she had said. Could he, remembering words like these, draw back? He smiled—a smile which altered his face sufficiently to make of him another man—at the thought of her, wonderfully beautiful, leaning toward him, telling him that her best days were to come, through him. . . .

He would resist no more. The way was plain, easy—and that other way was impossible, utterly impossible, for she shared his secret. Because of that which she knew he could not draw back now, even if he had willed it. No, he would resist no more, but would go on.

With the final decision came relaxation of strain, and a great content. As if a slave to morphia craving had made one great effort to break his bonds, then, yielding to his desire, had found sweet rest in the influence of the drug, and with cessation of his effort cared no more, nor realised that his rest was transient, nor dreamed of his inevitable end.

Through all the days which were left to him Sanderson remembered the night on the Heath. The faces which he saw, the reality (to him) of the fantastic scenes which he pictured that night, proved that he had been near on insanity for the time, but, even when cool reasoning showed him this, the impressions kept their strength. And the face which he had driven away by his determined opposition—it was a fantasy, the merest imagination, but often he would recall a sentence from that night as if some real voice had spoken it.

One may ascribe his actions, in the months immediately following, to the influence of that night, for in it he settled, finally, questions which would otherwise have perplexed him, and would have brought about his awakening very soon. Having made decision, though in a state and at a time when his mental balance was a matter of grave question, he went forward without pause or thought—decision and action were one, with him. It was not so much that he had decided on a definite line of action as that he had decided the line of action was right—more right than any other course he could pursue. In that lay the

only cause for his blindness—after the night on the Heath he ceased to question, until forced, by undreamed-of circumstances, to sane reasoning and clear sight.

So it came about that a night of fantastic unreality proved as powerful a factor as any in the shaping of his life.

There was cause for this in the events which led up to that night: the limit of tension to which he was subjected for eighteen hours; the swing between it and limit of passion, in which he sought and found transient release of forgetfulness; and the hardly less severe strain to which he was subjected until the foreman of the coroner's jury pronounced his and his fellows' verdict. There was further cause in the terrible—for the word is justified—accessibility of the means of forgetfulness which he sought. Terrible, since in conjunction with other causes it could lead to such a result as this.

There had stood, five days before, a man like his fellows, save in the one respect of his knowledge and concealment of the circumstances attendant on his sister's death. There stood on Westminster Bridge one years older in effect, though not in time, with a view of his fellows such as the man of five days before would have considered impossible—a deranged, distorted view, gained from his knowledge of Orme's life, as shown by the surgeon's evidence, and fixed, unquestionably, by his association with Elma Steele.

The quality of that last factor is indefinable, since the influence Elma Steele exercised over

him lay in no one action of hers, in no words that she had spoken—it was a result of the power of attraction in the woman herself. Not that she did, but that she was—in reckoning up the future and making decision Sanderson realised only that she was, and he did not look beyond the fact. Thus he had no thought of result, of gain or loss. As he stood on Westminster Bridge, he saw no further than the journey down by the noon train, of which he had spoken when he stood with Elma in the drawing-room at Rockford House.

I do not seek extenuation for him, but, in justice to him, record facts, and no more ; and of these, the most convincing was Elma Steele as she was then—as he knew her. There was a quality about her, a result of her parentage and tropic intensity of nature, perhaps, which made her indefinable, elusive, tempting as some strange, fleeting fragrance which, having known, one strives vainly to recollect. As she appeared, irresistibly strong, with hands stretched out towards the west, her face lit by a low sun and vivid memories ; as she stood on the Castle Hill, telling, with indescribable effect, of how she had left her home to come to William Steele ; as she appeared on the night of the dance, a very queen of beauty ; and again, as she stood bending toward Sanderson in the half-light of dawn, telling more with her eyes than with her lips—in every aspect she was deeper, greater than others, evidencing power of which only glimpses were revealed, and beyond assessment. . . .

In so far as it may be said of any unit of humanity, she came into Sanderson's life as a

physical perfection, governed by a mind whose many aspects are irreconcilable, confusing — a type of all women in that she embodied a mass of perplexing contradictions, and by them added to her power.

There is in the *Tannhäuser* overture a passage of transition, without which even Wagner dared not to change from the splendid purpose of the marching pilgrims to the riot and laughter and licence of Venusburg : a weird conflict of emotions, type of the eternal struggle between the higher and lower influences that contend for the guidance of man. For Sanderson, the night on the Heath was the transition passage.

THE END OF THE THIRD PHASE

THE FOURTH PHASE

CHAPTER XIII

SCANDALOUS AND BURGLARIOUS

UNDERSTAND that, in passing over the railway journey of Tuesday noon with the bare mention of it as an accomplished fact, and in coming forward to the time when Elma Steele and Jack Sanderson alighted at Brayley from the mid-day train, I do so with deliberate intent. I sit to record causes and a result, not, as might be inferred from some incidents which must be regarded as causes, to stir up the sensual passions of neurotic seekers after fresh food for the pleasures of imagination. And I claim without hesitation that no one scene which I have reproduced here is other than an essential to the final result—not one is immaterial.

Thus it will happen, between this time and that of the final event, that many, many meetings between this man and woman will pass unrecorded, for only in a few of their meetings was there incident of material value to this history. The course of such a passion as theirs is inevitable ; there are stolen meetings, brief periods of satiety, swift renewals of desire

—and there is a certain glamour attendant on every phase, an attribute which may be termed the deadly sweetness of forbidden fruit, if the woman be such a one as was Elma Steele.

So, taking for granted the inevitable happenings, I pass on to relate incidents perhaps smaller, but all essential.

On that Tuesday morning there went out through Brayley a rumour to the effect that Sanderson had been arrested, for Mrs. Wilson, meeting his housekeeper (the old housekeeper had never dreamed of becoming such a centre of interest as this case made her) in the High Street that morning, ascertained that Mr. Sanderson had not returned from London after the inquest of the preceding day. Naturally, Mrs. Wilson drew only one conclusion from this, and, as one result of her spreading the tidings, the frequenters of the King's Arms and other houses of resort were making bets, before noon, on Sanderson's guilt or innocence, commenting that these quiet ones were always the worst, and hazarding conjectures as to whether his trial would take place at the county assizes or in London. He was tried, and condemned or acquitted, according to the view taken by the critic, a dozen times that morning. Old Miss Grubb, the vinegary-faced spinster who kept the local newspaper shop, wired just after eight o'clock for a fresh supply of papers containing an account of the inquest, and an eager crowd of news-seekers sat on doorsteps round about her little shop, waiting the arrival of the papers. Taken as a whole, the lower-middle and lower classes of Brayley felt that it amounted

to something, being citizens of a place connected so closely with a real murder sensation—they had not lived in vain, as it were, if such glory as this were to be reflected on them.

On the two preceding occasions when Sanderson and Elma Steele had come off the midday train together, Mrs. Wilson had missed them, but on this Tuesday the gentle Frances chanced to be in the vicinity of the station, and she saw Sanderson alight from a first-class compartment and hand Elma Steele out on to the platform. Frances waited until she had ascertained that the carriage contained no other occupants, then she went off hot-footed. Within half an hour Mrs. Wilson knew that the two had come down together.

Sanderson, walking up the High Street alone and unconcernedly, was regarded by loafers and busy-bodies with bitter resentment—he had no business to be walking about like this, but, independently of guilt or innocence, ought to have been arrested, for they had heard that he *had* been arrested. This careless strolling about, freely as the next man, was a swindle—Brayley people felt that Sanderson had played them a mean trick, for they had been done out of an anticipated sensation, and that the biggest of its kind likely to come their way for years.

But Mrs. Wilson, to adopt an antique nautical term, had yet another shot in her locker. It was clear that Sanderson had not been arrested on the capital charge, or he would not be here. It was clear, from what Frances had seen—dear, good Frances! what a thoughtful girl she was!—that

Sanderson had come down with Mrs. Steele from London. It was also clear, from what Sanderson's housekeeper had said, that he had not spent the night in Brayley. Now, Mrs. Wilson would be the last person in the world to say a word against anybody—she wouldn't even hint at a thing unless she were quite certain of it—but she wanted to ask just one little question. Where did Mrs. Steele spend Monday night?

The first person of whom Mrs. Wilson asked her little question was Mrs. Wiggins, who looked somewhat puzzled by it, not being by any means used to having riddles hurled at her in that manner. She answered after a brief period of reflection that Mrs. Steele spent the night at Rockford House, of course.

“My dear—are you sure of that?” Mrs. Wilson propounded this second little question in sepulchral solemn tones.

Mrs. Wiggins confessed that she was not, but she had no reason for supposing otherwise.

Mrs. Wilson reminded her that Mr. Sanderson and Mrs. Steele had come off the midday train, from London, together, and that Mr. Sanderson had spent the night in London. Without the slightest intention of hinting for one minute that there was anything between the two, she really would like to know——

Dear, dear! She was sure it was going to rain, and she really must hurry home. She had had no idea that she had stayed so long.

But, on the way, she felt that she must call in and see Mrs. Scott. She left the same hints and

innuendoes there, and backed them by informing Mrs. Scott that Mrs. Wiggins had quite agreed with her, and, really, the matter did call for explanation—but she must hurry home. Yet, on the way, she felt constrained to look in and see how Mrs. Smith was, and had Mrs. Smith heard—Here she had Mrs. Wiggins and Mrs. Scott both agreeing with her in that the matter did look very suspicious, and—but she really must hurry home, for she was quite certain it was going to rain. However, as the sky had cleared when she got a little farther on, she simply couldn't pass Mrs. Rogers' place without calling, and did Mrs. Rogers know—

Mrs. Wilson drank so much tea that afternoon at the various houses she visited that she became neither more nor less than a perambulating tea-tank by the time she reached home. Some of the seed that she sowed fell among thorns, and was neglected; some fell on the hard rocks of unbelief and common sense; some fell by the wayside, food for the birds of ridicule; and a moiety fell on ground as fertile as a Welshman's imagination, where it brought forth fruit abundantly. And, strong in the knowledge that she had achieved not a little in the interests of public morality since she set out, Mrs. Wilson returned home to tell the gentle Frances of the success attendant on her mission. Whereat that damsel, remembering Sanderson's conduct on the night of the ball, rejoiced and was exceeding glad, though in a modest, quiet way which befitted her youth and virgin innocence.

By Thursday of that week Mrs. Brace was wandering round the village in governess-car and furs,

and imparting to all and sundry the information that Jack Sanderson and Elma Steele had spent Monday night at an hotel in London—if any proof was required, there was Sanderson's signature in the hotel register. Yes, lots of people in Brayley knew it, and it might be regarded as an absolutely sure fact. As Mrs. Brace was careful not to give the name of the hotel, nobody had a chance of inspecting the register and ascertaining the truth—or rather, absence of truth—in her statement.

Mrs. Brace's joy in spreading this rumour may be ascribed to the fact that she had always desired—even longed for—an invitation to Rockford House, but had never been able to obtain one. She stood at the opposite end of Brayley's social scale to that at which Elma Steele stood—the scale might be described as composed of several octaves, consisting more of flats than of sharps or naturals—and, although there were few in the place who did not “know” Mrs. Wilson, the fact of Mrs. Brace's existence was ignored by quite a number of Brayley's better-class people. Resenting this, Mrs. Brace did not love these people, and least of all did she love Mrs. Steele, for the latter was unquestionably the most beautiful woman in the district, while, as far as beauty was concerned, Mrs. Brace was well in the running for the wooden spoon. In that alone was a sufficient cause for a lack of warm affection, to put it mildly.

On Friday morning of the week in which the inquest on John Orme was held, Sanderson went up by the express to London, as usual, and the ancient dame who attended to his needs at home, having

performed her duties as housemaid, emerged from the thatched cottage at about ten o'clock, locked the door, and trudged up the road toward her own home. On a gate which led into the meadow across the road from Sanderson's cottage sat two loafers chewing straws and talking about nothing in particular, after the manner of their kind, and they watched the old woman's slow progress up the road as if, since she was the only moving object in sight worth mention, they might as well watch her as anything else. One of them, a big, powerful-looking fellow in a shabby grey suit, with his shirt-collar unfastened, displaying a bare and somewhat dirty throat, and with his coat-collar turned up, held in his hand a knotted red handkerchief, and this bulged as if filled with the usual toilet and sleeping outfit of a tramp. One side of this man's face was badly disfigured by a long scar, such as might have been caused by a hot iron—except for this, he was not a bad-looking fellow. The other reprobate had the appearance of a man who has come down in the world, and even his extremely shabby clothes could not quite destroy a look of refinement which was his, though, if one observed him closely, it would be seen that a certain shiftiness about his eyes marred an otherwise pleasant face.

These two chewed their straws until the old dame had passed out of sight round the first bend in the road, and then the bigger of the two, having finished his straw, spoke.

"Go ahead," he said; "I'll keep watch from here."

Thereupon the smaller of the two became extremely business-like and energetic, for a loafer. He climbed down from the gate, and, taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, crossed the road and went to Sanderson's cottage door. The eighth key which he tried in the lock answered his purpose, and he entered, closing the door behind him. In the sitting-room stood a big tin deed-box, which this well-equipped loafer opened with a key from another bunch. He inspected the contents of the box with thorough precision, subsequently replacing everything as he had found it—even three sovereigns which he found in an envelope down in one corner of the box. Having concluded his examination, he locked the box again and made for a big writing-case on a side-table, which he subjected to a minute scrutiny. Out of the contents of the case he retained one postmarked envelope which he found, empty, between two leaves of blotting-paper.

Then, moving swiftly, quietly, and in the manner of one who knows his work, he went round the sitting-room, examining everything minutely—he even looked into the case of the clock on the mantel—and replacing everything as he had found it. But, though he glanced through every letter which he came across in his search, he took nothing more.

In like manner he passed through the two bedrooms, and even the bathroom, replacing everything as he found it. He went through all the pockets of Sanderson's clothes, and sorted out the contents of every drawer and box, paying particular attention to such papers as he discovered.

But, save for the one envelope, he took nothing, and he was most careful to leave everything as he had found it, that no traces of his visit might remain. Altogether, he spent quite two hours inside the house, and not a minute of the time was wasted for want of method or energy.

Having finished his search, he opened the door by which he had entered from the garden, and looked out, but cautiously. The big man, who still sat on the gate chewing straws, scratched his head, whereupon his confederate retired abruptly. When a butcher's cart had passed out of sight, the inquisitive one looked out again, and again the big man scratched his head. After a steam-roller had followed the butcher's cart, the inquisitive man looked out once more, and this time the big man nodded. Then the inquisitive man came out from the cottage, locked the door, and proceeded to search the garden. In a little time he came to a spot which looked as if it had been dug over recently, and, finding a four-pronged fork in an outhouse at the back of the cottage, he dug this patch over again very deeply and very thoroughly, crumbling every clod of earth with his fingers—but he found nothing. After he had concluded this business, during which he crouched down four times under the garden hedge to avoid possible questioning from passers-by, he looked carefully over all the rest of the garden; but it had all been planted at the commencement of the summer, and, evidently, had not been disturbed since. The inquisitive man replaced the fork in the outhouse, in the exact spot where he had found it, and ex-

aminated the outhouse even to the spaces between rafters and tiles.

He came out from the garden—there was nobody in sight, so the big man's head did not need scratching—and the two disreputable figures went off together, down to the station. There they waited until a train for London came in, when, dispensing with the formality of taking tickets, they entered an empty third-class compartment. As soon as the train was clear of the station the big man untied his red handkerchief and took out a collar and tie, a brush and comb, a sponge bag, and a soft felt hat, which, when placed on his head instead of the dirty cap he had pulled down over his forehead, made him look another man. He sponged the scar off his face, turned down his coat-collar, brushed and combed his hair with the assistance of a small mirror which the inquisitive man lent him, put on his collar, tie, and felt hat, and sat back in the corner of the carriage with his toilet completed as the train pulled up at Wickbury. Sanderson would hardly have given a second glance at the big loafer who sat, chewing straws, on the gate, but he would have recognised, in this man who sat down in the corner of the carriage, Inspector Mackinnon.

“Now,” said Mackinnon, as they went out from Wickbury with their privacy undisturbed, “I think we're far enough from that little village to hold an inspection of the swag, Jimmy.”

Jimmy, who was the reverse of loquacious, handed over the postmarked envelope by way of reply. It was of good paper, and of the tint known

as "Silurian Grey." Mackinnon saw that it was addressed in a feminine handwriting to Sanderson, and, on examining the postmarks, found that it had been dispatched from Felixstowe on 8th May, and received at Brayley on 9th May. Looking inside it, Mackinnon found, of course, nothing.

"Interesting," he commented, "but not conclusive enough to howl about. Next?"

"Nothing," said Jimmy. "He uses white paper and envelopes himself—there's not a scrap of any other colour in the place."

"You went through everything?" Mackinnon asked, rather disappointedly.

"Everything—you know I don't scamp work."

"I know—especially that sort of work, or maybe you wouldn't have done five years' penal."

Jimmy looked hurt—the allusion was not a pleasant one, to him.

"And there wasn't even a gun?" Mackinnon pursed. "Nor any cartridges to fit a thirty-two?"

"Nothing at all but a twelve-bore breech-loading shot-gun. You didn't want that, I know."

"No," Mackinnon said reflectively; "I wanted an automatic pistol that hadn't had time to grow any bigger. Well, Jimmy"—he put the envelope away and took out a cigarette case—"we've barked up the wrong tree, and perhaps it lies in the States, after all. We've been guilty of a real, deliberate burglary, and it's my first experience of the kind, though I'm afraid you couldn't say the same. It's my first experience, too, of methods I don't ought to use—but that case was worth it."

“ You reckon — that envelope —— ” Jimmy suggested.

“ No, it’s nothing,” Mackinnon dissented. “ One cartridge would have been worth a thousand of it. Had he used “ Silurian Grey,” now, I would have said there was something in it—though a very little, since hundreds of people use it. But that envelope was sent to him, and by a lady friend, too—no, I’m afraid we’ve got to look elsewhere, Jimmy.”

And here, like the gallant sergeant of the glorious Fifth, Inspector Mackinnon returns to his duties and ceases to interest us, while Jimmy follows him. And the Innis Place Mystery remained a mystery—so far as Inspector Mackinnon is concerned, it remains a mystery unto this day.

But I wonder what would have happened if Mackinnon had acted on the information which that empty envelope gave—if he had gone to Felixstowe, learned of the circumstances attendant on Esther Sanderson’s death, and pursued his investigations with the theory that she, who died in such a way, might possibly have sent the scrap of a “ Silurian Grey ” envelope which was mentioned at the inquest on John Orme.

By the end of that week, Brayley people had talked the Innis Place Mystery threadbare ; the morning papers had relegated it to a back page, giving it curt mention only ; and the rest of the world, finding new sensations every day, had practically forgotten it. A column article certainly did appear in one of the dailies, making reference

to the case, criticising the efficiency of the police rather severely, and commenting that murders were likely to become plentiful since they could be committed in broad daylight in the heart of London and remain mysteries. The general public, however, failed to realise the grave danger of the situation.

In Brayley, Sanderson was an object of interest for some weeks, owing to his connection with the case, and residents pointed him out to newcomers or those who had been away at the end of July, telling all that they knew of Innis Place and its mystery, and much that they did not know. Then, for want of fresh material, the subject died out, and was practically forgotten.

As for Sanderson, he remembered a sentence imagined on Hampstead Heath—

“The act, which is its own reward . . .”

But the reward was not yet.

CHAPTER XIV

AT ELGIN

ONE evening in the week following the search at Sanderson's cottage, the vicar called there, and found Sanderson busily weeding in the garden. The latter fetched out two chairs, and sat down to talk with his visitor, who, after the manner of a nervous man with something on his mind, plunged directly into the subject on which he had come to speak.

"I hope you will regard my interest—my confidence in you as unshaken, Mr. Sanderson," he opened up. "I have called to speak—I mentioned the subject to you once before—about——"

"About the Steeles," Sanderson said, filling in the pause and helping him out. "Well, what's wrong now? Does Brayley say that Mrs. Steele and I have planned an elopement, or what?"

He spoke lightly, but the form of his question afforded the opportunity the vicar wanted.

"Brayley is saying, Mr. Sanderson, that you and Mrs. Steele—that you—er—in fact, that you spent the night after the Innis Place inquest in London, together."

Sanderson sprang up, wrathfully. "Are they,

by God ? ” he said. Then, remembering that the vicar was a vicar, “ I beg your pardon, but these lying harridans who go by the name of women in this place are enough to make a saint use bad language. Who’s backing this rumour ? ”

“ As nearly as I can make out, Mrs. Brace is behind it.”

“ I’ll see Mrs. Brace to-morrow ”—he spoke vindictively — “ and my name’s not Sanderson if——”

“ Wait,” the vicar interrupted ; “ just think a little. What can you do ? ”

“ Do ? ” He echoed the word with rising anger. “ Make her take it back, of course.”

The vicar smiled. “ She’s told half the women in Brayley that it is so, and yet—of course, any person with a grain of sense knows that Mrs. Steele spent Monday night at Rockford House, but there are some who would like to believe otherwise. Yet, I mean to say, before you can move in this you must have the evidence of an independent witness—one who heard Mrs. Brace make the statement. You can do nothing without that evidence, and the point is—can you get it ? ”

Sanderson sat down again, and, bending forward, thought awhile. At last he looked up at the vicar. “ No,” he said, “ I can’t get it.”

“ Then what use will it be for you to see Mrs. Brace ? ”

He considered it. “ I can see her, and tell her that the rumour has reached through to me,” he said. “ I can tell her it has got to stop.”

The vicar laughed a little. “ It’s very evident

that you know little of that class of woman," he answered. "The next event after your visit would be a round of calls on her friends by Mrs. Brace, for the purpose of telling them that you had been to her and begged her to keep quiet about it."

"Then what is to be done?" He looked puzzled as he asked the question.

"Get an independent witness to prove that Mrs. Brace has spread the rumour—and then, if you get Mrs. Steele to go as far as the publicity of denying it with you, you may get an apology. Failing that—nothing can be done."

"Then I rather think it's nothing. Good Lord! Why do they do it?"

"It's a perversion of the instinct of social government, I think—but that fact won't help you."

"What do you advise?"

Again the vicar smiled. "That you limit your calls to Rockford House to the hours which Steele himself spends there, the same as I advised less than a month ago. You can do nothing in this—only guard against a recurrence of it."

No thought of his own answer on that other occasion came to Sanderson now, for the time of awakening was not yet. He dropped the subject, and talked with the vicar for nearly an hour on different matters, and, after the latter had gone, returned to his gardening. Regarding the rumour Mrs. Brace had spread, he saw that it was useless to attempt to stop it—any action on his part would merely add fuel to the fire.

But, on the next Sunday morning, the vicar did

his part from the pulpit. He denounced the slanderous tongues of the village in no measured terms, satirised the petty meanness of the minds which prompted lying accusations—he made enemies among his flock by that sermon, but he also made friends, for some realised that here a man spoke justly and with truth, and honoured him for his courage. Yet there were several whom the matter concerned who missed his sermon.

For those who attend places of worship at the present day may be divided, roughly, under three heads. There is, first and largest among these classes, the family which attends because it is a mark of respectability—it adds to the dignity of the head of the family to be seen weekly in the family pew with the members of his household; there is the single man, usually between eighteen and thirty, who attends because a certain specimen of femininity is likely to be present; and, lastly, there are the specimens of femininity. Others there are who attend for less human and more spiritual reasons, of course; but they are a negligible quantity—the Church of to-day is seldom maintained by the motives of its Founder.

Now there comes a period of pause, made up of things so inevitable that a very brief mention of them will suffice. First among them to be noted is the growth of the firm of Sanderson and Steele, for Steele “roped in” firm after firm of shipowners, and the plant for manufacturing the composition had to be extended three times in the first six months. Sanderson, however, maintained the

company as private, declining to increase the share capital or let the public in, for the time. Much of his own time, during that first six months, was spent in visits to different shipping centres for the purpose of extending the business: he went out to Liverpool, to Newcastle, to Cardiff and Bristol, and to the Clyde ports—contrary to the rule governing most men of an inventive turn of mind, he developed sound administrative talent in the management of the business, which flourished and grew strong accordingly.

Meanwhile another idea was developing in his mind, something in connection with the processes involved in the manufacture of iron, and many of his spare hours were spent in experiments in the sitting-room of his cottage. To such an extent did he pursue these investigations that his house-keeper declared a new smell met her at the door every morning, and each one was worse than that which had preceded it, though all were enough to knock a body back'ards. The amount of truth contained in this statement is now, unfortunately, past ascertaining.

With this slight outline the business side of Sanderson's life may be dismissed—or rather, borne in the background of the mind as a side which correlated closely with his more personal interests, an uninteresting factor, but present always, and not to be quite ignored.

That autumn he bought a little, ten-horse-power motor car, a grey, low-built thing which could develop some considerable speed, and in this he made several of his business expeditions. But he

disappointed Brayley by continuing his tenancy of the thatched cottage. Burrows, who was by way of being an architect in the time which his fads left free, called on him one evening to point out to him the advantages which might be derived from a larger house built according to his own ideas, but he shook his head at the suggestion.

"No," he said, "I'm at home here, and don't want anything bigger or better."

Burrows departed somewhat abruptly, for, in addition to declining to consider the subject of building, Sanderson trod on his corns by offering him whisky. And Burrows was violently non-alcoholic, as he was violently non-everything-else.

At about the middle of September the Steeles went to Scotland for a month—they went away every year in like manner, sometimes on a continental tour, and sometimes to home resorts. Usually, Steele liked to keep within long reach of London, and, twice or thrice during the month, he would run down to his office for a day or two—the man's heart was in the work which had made him, and he could not content himself for long away from it. Together with his wife he went to Scotland this year—the place was Elma's choice—and they planned a series of excursions ranging northward to Inverness and Elgin, north-westward to Oban, and south-westward to Ayr; some of these plans they carried out. While they were at Elgin, Sanderson was making one of his visits to the Clyde ports, and from Elgin Steele went down to London for three days. Sanderson, who had his car with him, hired a man who knew the roads,

and, covered with rugs, slept in the car while the express which bore Steele roared down through Aberdeen and Dundee on its way south. Sanderson's man drove all night, and ran into Elgin an hour after dawn—the car was practically new, and the tyres held out through the journey.

So one comes to a break in that current of inevitable happenings, finding it in a grey afternoon when a light, inconstant breeze blew up from the south toward the Moray Firth, and the day was warm—warm for Elgin. Early that afternoon Sanderson and Elma went together to the ruins of Elgin cathedral, where, on entering the gateway, they came on a little old woman who will either conduct her visitors over what is left of the once splendid fabric, or will let them go round alone, as they will. She unlocked the door leading to the one accessible tower, and these two elected to go round alone.

They passed down the mighty nave, which lies open to the sky, gravelled, with smooth turf where, on either side, were seats ranged for worshippers, once. Returning from the cathedral's eastern end, they entered the great tower and climbed the winding stairway, disturbing as they went the many pigeons which make their home here. They went quite to the summit and looked out, seeing how, south and west and beneath them, the grey and quiet town lay spread, and beyond it the green, haze-veiled country stretched away to the heather and the hills. After a little time they descended to the uppermost chamber in the tower—so far they had spoken little, for this mighty, sombre

relic of Scotland's harsher times has a quietening effect on its visitors, no matter the cause for which they come. Now, while these two stood in the still, grey gloom of the chamber—still as such heights are—Sanderson noted a patch of dust near the shoulder of Elma's coat, and he brushed it off with his hand.

"You've touched against something," he explained; "it looked noticeable on the coat."

"And you," she answered, smiling. "It is on you in a dozen places."

"It's the staircase—I must have been careless."

She looked round the big chamber. "Why need we go back, we two?" she asked, laying her hands on his shoulders. "Why can't we stay here away from everything—just you and I?"

The sweet, strange scent, which he always remembered as an attribute of her and of none other, was about her now; the strong desire which lit her eyes was that of which the memory had drawn him to her now, away from his work and from thought of that which he did in yielding to such temptations as this. He did not answer, but took her hands from his shoulders and held them, inwardly echoing her wish.

"Why do I care for you?" she asked again. "Why is it you, and not any other? Jack—I want you to understand, and here—I think it is the influence of this place—I have a feeling that you will not understand always. But I want you to know it is you I care for—there was never anybody else. Why—ah! why didn't I wait for you?"

"But I should never have known, dear—I should

never have come, and this is the only way," he answered gently. "You would have been in Grenada, and I here—we two should not have met."

"Yet I think—caring as I do, I think somehow you would have come. It is a foolish fancy, I know, but I think that if I had waited you would have come to me—because I care so much for you. And—life is made up of foolish fancies."

He smiled, and, lifting her hand, kissed it.

"Isn't it?" she asked.

"Some of it," he assented, "and some few hours of very real happiness."

"But they are not enough—not enough!" she said wistfully. "After this hour I must go back—and it is so hard to go back, to know that days, perhaps weeks, must pass, and then another little hour or two with you. It is not enough."

He stepped away from her, and, spreading his coat in the embrasure of a window, sat down and reached out his hands. "Elma—come!" he said.

She came, swiftly, and sat down beside him, clasping her arms round his neck. "I think—if I were dead, and you called like that, I could not help but waken and come," she whispered.

"Listen!" she said. "Last night I dreamed—I saw Bridgetown harbour in Barbados, and it was night. I stood on a ship and looked back—there were all the lights of the harbour, and I saw the lighthouse on the point—my ship was going out, and I thought it was going to Grenada. And you—there was nobody else in the dream, only you and I—you stood on another ship, and I called

to you, but you did not answer, and I knew I should never see you again, nor come to you any more. I was going home—I have wanted to go home for eight years, but it was pain to go, since I could not come to you again—it was such pain that I wakened crying. What does it mean, Jack ? ”

“ You said, not long ago, that life is made up of foolish fancies. Count this as one of them.”

“ Jack ”—she nestled closely to him as if it were cold, and she came to him for warmth—“ if ever that day should come, there will be no more life for me—only existence and memory of these hours with you.”

The breeze from the south failed, and the quiet town grew yet more quiet, as the grey afternoon drew on towards its end. A long time these two sat still, the woman content in the hour—such is the way of women—the man half lost in the dream which made hours like this so much to her, and half troubled by thoughts which he strove to reject. For it was he who moved first—he bent down and kissed her lips, suddenly, passionately, and the action marked self-coercion, determination to drive away the thoughts which came, and, with her, to forget all but her.

“ It is time to go, Elma,” he said.

While she stood before him, splendid life amid the musty ruin of life gone out, there came to him the first faint premonition of an awakening—like the little whisper of a breeze which precedes dawn in summer. For, looking at her, hesitating before they went down, he smiled in a forced, slight way.

“How will it all end, Elma?” he asked, almost wearily.

The question—it is probable that she had anticipated and feared the time when he should ask it—brought her two steps forward, and she stood almost touching him. “No!” she said. “You mustn’t look forward—take what the day gives, dear! I—I take what the day gives, and try to be content in knowing that another day with you is to come—I don’t look beyond it, except to see you again. It is best so—it is all we can do. Won’t—won’t you be content, too?”

Not the words, but the thought behind them mastered him, and the stir of awakening passed—he grasped her, held her closely, almost fiercely. “Oh, you Elma—you Elma!” he answered. “Who couldn’t be content, with you—who couldn’t forget to look forward except to you?”

“So, dear—forget always. The days are enough, for me, and because of them I can live through the time between.”

He went back, as he had come, through the night, but sleepless beside the man who drove, and staring forward into the darkness—into the rainy dawn which came on him as the Highlands slipped behind. Yet, though he sat with opened eyes, he dreamed; for the power of the woman held him surely and quieted all thoughts of the end. He dreamed of the day just passed, and, as she had bidden, of the day to come. And, as she had said, what mattered the end, or the things which, being beyond knowledge, were also beyond fear?

CHAPTER XV

THE LAST ASSIGNATION

THE inevitable meetings between Sanderson and Elma Steele in the concluding months of that year may be taken for granted. The Steeles came back from Scotland, the autumn grew old and gave place to winter, and Sanderson went in and out at Rockford House as if it were in truth his second home—as Elma had, at the commencement of their friendship, asked him to regard it. He dined there often with the Steeles, and oftener still “dropped in” informally to spend an evening with Steele, for while this phase lasted he faced the man whom he wronged without hesitancy or remorse, talked with him freely, and maintained an appearance of open, frank friendliness which would have quieted any doubts, had Steele owned them. That attitude is characteristic of men placed in such a position as was Sanderson, for without the attitude the position could not be maintained.

But Steele never for one second doubted his wife’s truth to him or his friend’s integrity. A man of honour himself, he would have laughed at the thought of infidelity on Elma’s part, and would

not have dreamed, unless proof had been laid before him, that Sanderson was other than he seemed. He left no desire which Elma expressed unsatisfied, he accorded her a devotion which time did not weaken, and he was proud of her, infinitely proud of her beauty. Long since, he had realised her reason for marrying him, and had accepted the fact that he could never expect love from her—out of all the success his life contained, he knew, this one thing was missing, and he could never win it. In this one thing, too, he lacked accurate perception, for he lived with this woman for eight years without realising that her beauty concealed a smouldering volcano of passion which any chance might, and which the chance of Sanderson's coming did, cause to flame forth, more fiercely for the years in which, controlled and unexpressed, it had gathered strength.

Weeks after Brayley people had ceased to discuss it, the rumour that Sanderson and Elma had spent a night together in London reached through to Steele. He told Sanderson of it, and laughed. "It has done no harm," he said; "but I would have made them sorry, had I known in time. They are always careful, though, that the man most concerned shall not know in time, when they are nursing a lie like that."

Just after the new year came what may be termed an epidemic of motor-cars in Brayley. Old Professor Jackson, of Brayley House, invested in a motor-brougham; the two doctors of the place bought a small two-seater apiece; and the Staceys became possessed of a big touring-car, which had

a habit of breaking down and being towed home ignominiously by the first available cart-horse. Altogether, nine of the principal residents of the place became car-owners at about the time that the annual concert, in aid of the Society for Providing Workhouse Children with Dancing Shoes, was held in Brayley recreation-room. The concert, by the way, proved somewhat of a failure, owing principally to the fact that young Jackson (the bumptious youth whose mare, in conjunction with a motor, nearly killed Steele) insisted on filling four numbers of the programme, and gave an encore—which was not called for—to each.

Then it came to pass that Elma Steele went down to Ashfordbury, which lies thirty miles distant from Brayley, to spend a week with the Grays—the invitation had been repeated several times since Constance visited Rockford House. Now, when March was young and Sanderson away in Liverpool, Elma decided to take advantage of it. Steele did not go, for he had much work to do in London at that time, and, because this work compelled him to spend less time than usual with Elma, he recommended that she accept the invitation rather than remain at home alone. It was arranged between them that she should go down to Ashfordbury on the Thursday, and, going thence to London on the following Thursday morning, return by the afternoon train to Brayley that day.

“Don’t you think we might have a car?” she asked Steele, on the morning preceding her departure; “everybody else has one, now.”

“Well, perhaps we might, dear,” he concurred. “I’ll see what can be done about it while you’re away.”

She went down to the house at Ashfordbury, where she was welcomed by Mrs. Gray, a quiet little woman who had been very pretty before time and poverty—the bitter poverty in which one has to fight to keep up appearances—marked cares on her face. Constance, too, welcomed her, while three younger sisters of varying sizes and two small boys regarded the magnificent lady with awe. Gray himself, returning from his work at the day’s end, was last to greet her—he was a bent, weary-looking man who had been ruined in the great “Liberator” smash, at the time when, not long married, he could least support the loss, and he had since made both ends meet, more or less, by filling the post of manager at some flour mills in the locality. The magnificent lady, distributing sweets among the children, felt inclined to smile at their reverent manners toward her, for, once, she had been poorer than they.

There arises out of the time Elma spent at Ashfordbury one small incident worthy of mention. She sat talking with Constance one night, and mentioned Sanderson’s name in speaking casually of happenings in Brayley. Constance, remembering his promise made on the night before she left, and through it keeping him in mind as girls will, would never have spoken his name unless Elma had first mentioned it. Now, however, she expressed a wish to see him again, and Elma looked her curiosity at the wish.

"I want him to tell me what he knows about—about John Orme," Constance explained.

Elma started at the name. "Don't," she said emphatically. "Never think of mentioning John Orme to him."

"No?" Constance asked, in the manner of one who would say, "Why not?"

"No—it would waken very painful memories, far better left asleep. There was some connection between Orme and Esther Sanderson's death—I do not know more, but he would not thank any one for mentioning Orme's name and recalling his loss."

This advice, acted on, bore fruit in due time, for Constance, not knowing that he had forgotten, remembered all that pertained to Sanderson, even to little things like this.

Meanwhile Steele, mindful of his wife's request, went to some west-end showrooms and ordered that a big, forty-horse-power Limousine which he chose should be sent down to Rockford House on the following Wednesday, together with a man capable of driving it. He intended going down to Ashfordbury very early on Thursday to surprise his wife with this realisation of her latest wish, and to bring her home in the car. And, rising early on Thursday morning, he piled rugs inside the car to protect Elma against the biting winds which made a traditional opening for the second week of March, and set out on the thirty-mile journey.

A little after noon on Wednesday—to go back

nearly a day—Sanderson stood at the meeting-place of millions, under the clock on Charing Cross platform, waiting—every five minutes he took out his watch to glance at it, and almost every minute he looked up at the clock. He walked over to the bookstall, went out and looked round the station yard, came back to his post under the clock, went to the bookstall again, turned—and faced Elma Steele. She laughed like a schoolgirl at the commencement of a holiday.

“Did you think I was not coming?” she asked. “Did you think I could miss this day, Jack?”

She laid her hand on his arm, and they went out together from the station. Many people turned to look at this radiantly happy woman—even here, where so many come, she made men and other women pause to glance a second time at her beauty.

They lunched at the Waldorf, and, as they sat together there, Sanderson suggested various plans for the afternoon—it was too cold, and the season too early, to go up the river or on any out-of-town expeditions. Elma was careless as to where they might go. “It is for you to say,” she said, “for I am with you—that is enough, and all the rest is nothing.”

In the end they went to the Hippodrome for the afternoon. Sanderson obtained two stalls in a good position, and they sat through the matinee—but one may doubt whether either saw or heard much of what passed on the stage, for in this step they planned further than they had dared attempt, hitherto. They had tea together at a quiet little

place which Sanderson knew, just out of Leicester Square, and here they sat long, speaking little, for words were needed between them only to conceal, not to tell. Then they went out into the street again, and Sanderson, hailing a taxi, directed the driver and handed Elma in.

“I think—it was all a pretence this afternoon,” he said, with an odd quiver in his voice, as he seated himself beside her. “It was not that we wanted to go anywhere, but that——”

Elma laid her hand on his, but made no other answer. The taxi passed up Shaftesbury Avenue, eastward along Oxford Street, and up Southampton Row, halting before one of the hotels near Russell Square. Sanderson paused before going up the steps to the hotel entrance, turning to look at Elma—the keen wind and excitement of the day had stung a deeper tinge of colour into her cheeks, and she was for the minute of such beauty that, realising it anew, he drew a sharply checked, audible breath at the sight of it, as men will when under the influence of some strong emotion.

“Well?” she asked, “what is it?”

“You,” he answered, smiling at her, “only you, Elma.”

They passed on up the steps together, and entered the hotel.

The house at Ashfordbury stands, little and old and ivy covered, on the shoulder of a steep hill, and to reach the front door from the road one must pass up a path which is bordered by hollyhocks and sweet-william, and tall white lilies in their

season, and many other old-fashioned flowers through the summer months. But, on the morning that William Steele came to the house, the earth bordering the path was sodden and bare and brown, and the fruit trees about the house, showing no sign of buds as yet, told that winter still held the land. The big Limousine took the hill as a hunter takes a fence in his stride, and halted before the little, unpainted, lichen-grown wooden gate. Before Steele had traversed half the pathway, Constance stood by the open door.

"Why, what's wrong?" she asked. "Has Elma left anything?"

"Nothing is wrong, and she's left nothing but herself, Connie," he answered cheerily. "I've come to take her home."

Constance looked perplexed. "But she left here yesterday," she said. "She went up to London by the morning train, to go home in the afternoon."

He stared, standing on the threshold—a hundred trifles suddenly crowded into his mind as things of moment, and, though hitherto he had been blind, he saw now. For a minute or more he stood thus, staring, and then he reached out his hand.

"Will you—take me in for a little while, Con? I—I think it's one of those heart attacks—I don't feel very well. And—I expected her."

She took his hand and led him into the family sitting-room, where he sat down in a big, shabby, comfortable arm-chair by the fire. The three younger sisters of varying sizes, and the two small brothers, regarded this stranger with patent

wonderment, and Mrs. Gray paused from her work at his unexpected entrance.

"He has come for Elma," Constance explained to her mother. Then—"Run away, you youngsters—no, Willie, Mr. Steele has not brought any sweets, and he's ill. Run away, dear—go and look at the car outside."

The children went out, and the woman who had once been pretty, but whom care had aged before her time, came and stood beside the man with whom the years had dealt more kindly. "What can we do, Will?" she asked.

He looked up at her—breathing heavily; he spoke with obvious effort. "Nothing, Nell—nothing," he answered, "only—let me sit here a little till—till this faintness has worn off. So Elma—my wife—has gone."

"She left yesterday morning," Constance answered, looking over him at her mother.

"For London?—I don't—I don't quite understand," Steele said confusedly.

Constance looked at her mother again. "She said she was going to London, Will, and then home in the afternoon," the elder woman answered gently.

Steele lay back in his chair. "She did not come," he said, and then for a time there was silence, for neither Constance nor Mrs. Gray could find words to answer him—they knew of no reason why Elma should not have gone home. But, facing the mantel as he sat, Steele saw the papers which lodged against the clock and behind ornaments—a house full of children is never quite tidy—

and one envelope, addressed to his wife, seemed to separate itself from the rest, to thrust itself out for his notice. He raised his hand and pointed at it. "Will you give me that—my wife's letter?" he asked of Constance.

She took the envelope down and gave it to him. "It is empty," she said; "there is only the envelope left."

But Steele knew the handwriting for Sanderson's. He leaned forward and thrust the empty envelope in the grate. "Even now, I will believe nothing short of absolute proof," he said.

Through another interval he sat silent, looking at the ashes of the envelope—suddenly he looked up at Mrs. Gray and smiled. "After all, Nell, you have had the better way, I think," he said. "You have Connie and the other children round you, while I—I am very nearly an old man, and very much alone. And—until to-day—I had always wished for children."

Constance knew of the ghost of an old romance between these two, a half-forgotten thing which his words caused to stir for a minute. Mrs. Gray, thinking more of his words than of the memory, understood what he implied by that—"until to-day."

"You have not gained the proof, yet, Will," she reminded him. "A hundred things may have happened, and it is so easy to accuse without cause."

"Yes, I know." He made a queer little gesture with his hand, and then sat silent again. Constance went to the window and watched the children,

who walked slowly round the big car outside the gate, staring at its driver and examining it with a mingling of reverent curiosity and envy of its owner.

Steele sat up and leaned forward, toward the fire. "I'm better now, Nell," he said; "but these heart attacks—they're getting rather too frequent. And this—Elma's leaving like this—it was rather a shock, at first."

"Most probably you'll find her waiting at home with an explanation," she answered hopefully.

"You'll find"—she had to listen intently to catch his words, for he did not intend that Constance should hear—"if anything should happen to me, I have not forgotten the children. You see, except for Elma, there was nobody else who mattered."

"I hope it may be kept from them for many years," she answered.

"I know." He stood up, grasping at the chair to steady himself, at first. "Now—I shall get quite fit in the car—I'm going to get proof, one way or other."

Constance came back from the window, having heard his last words. "Let me come out with you to the car," she said. "I'm fairly strong, and you can lean on me if you wish—if you find it necessary."

She went out with him—her eyes expressed full understanding as, by the open door of the car, she shook hands and bade him good-bye. Save for that, she spoke no word, but Steele knew that she understood. There was much that was identical in their two natures, for both had the

same strength and simplicity, and he could almost have told her thoughts as she looked at him—he knew that she feared, as he feared, what he would find before this journey's end. Thus, knowing, and without the need for expression, they bade good-bye.

Constance stood watching while the car slid down the hill, passed across a valley, and, climbing the hill beyond, passed out of sight. "I wonder," she said, as she turned away—"did he remember, or was I wrong, after all?" It was not of Steele that she thought, then.

Meanwhile the big car went on steadily to Brentwood, where Steele halted for lunch and rest—he had hours to spare, and knew it. Leaving Brentwood in the afternoon, he went on to London, and his car drew up in the yard which one reaches by way of the main entrance to Liverpool Street station. Here he got down and spoke with the driver.

"From here I shall probably take a taxi, between now and a quarter past five," he said. "Sit here, watch for me, and whatever I enter follow it with the car until I get out and call you."

Then, sitting back in the car, he waited until ten minutes past five, when Elma alighted from a hansom and went out on to the platform. As Steele had anticipated, she had come to catch the five-twenty for Brayley. She came alone, for she and Sanderson had long since given up travelling together.

Steele got out from his car and went over to the cab-driver. "I want you to take me to where you

picked up your last fare," he said. "The journey is worth exactly one sovereign to you."

"Right y'are, sir," cabby answered. "In yer gets."

But on the way that cabman had misgivings regarding the questionable nature of such a proceeding as giving a lady away, after she had paid him handsomely. He drove up through the city, along Cheapside and Holborn, until he came to the Oxford Street end of Kingsway. Here he pulled up beside the kerb, and Steele's car, following, stopped behind him. Steele got out of the cab.

"What's the exact legal fare for the distance, cabby?" he asked.

"You said a suverin, sir."

"Ah, but that was to be the fare between Liverpool Street and the hotel. There's farther to go yet if you mean to earn that fare."

It was a chance shot, but his air of cool assurance made it tell. "Blimey!" the cabman remarked, "I didn't know you knew the place, sir. It's a go—I'll take you there."

Steele got in, and the cabman drove up Southampton Row, where yet again his conscience smote him. He went through into Russell Square and pulled up before the Russell Hotel; but Steele, who had doubts, would not trouble to get out until he had settled them. He opened the little trap in the top of the hansom.

"Now, you know as well as I know, cabby, that this wasn't the hotel," he said. "You're merely wasting my time like this, and your own too."

With something very much like an oath the

cabman wrenched his horse round, and Steele's Limousine turned to follow when he had passed it. He drew up before the door which Sanderson and Elma had entered on the preceding night, but Steele, not yet satisfied, opened the trap again.

"I think you have a little farther to go yet, cabby," he said.

"Gorblimey, sir!" the cabman answered, in an injured tone. "Look at it!"

Then Steele descended to the pavement, and, having given the man his sovereign, entered the hotel. Ten minutes later he came out, and his face was a trace paler, for he had found the proof he sought. He beckoned to the driver of the car he had bought for his wife.

"Now," he said quietly, "I think you might drive me home," and he stepped into the car.

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT STEELE SAW IN THE FIRE

THE big car purred up to the door of Rockford House, and Steele, entering as noiselessly as was possible, went to a little room on the right of the house. There, closing the door behind him, he drew up a chair and sat down before the fire which had been made up in anticipation of his return. The wind, roaring in trees about the house, would be sufficient to drown the noise made by the car, he hoped, and to prevent his wife from learning of his arrival until he chose to let her know. He wanted to see her once more—only once—but there were many things which he wished to arrange and settle in his mind, first.

He knew that there were many things, but, except that he must see Sanderson, he could not think of them. His mental vision was blurred, like a lens out of focus, and he could get nothing to take definite shape in his mind, strive as he might. There were the events of the day—behind them was a haze of past from which they barred him, and, beyond them in the future, chaos. Elma had made chaos and wreck of his life, for no reason that he knew—in striving to look back into the

haze of past events, he could not blame himself with any one action or quiescence with regard to her. It was so irrational, so purposeless, this ruin she had brought on him.

After a time, as he sat beside the fire, it became easy for him to look back, to remember, though, if he tried to look forward or plan forward, this difficulty of chaotic impressions arose to stop him. Yes, he could look back easily, as one looks on a panorama spread out—back to the very beginning, the time when he went to Grenada and met her on the summit of Morne Fédon. Even then, at first sight of her, he had known that here was the one woman for him. The girl Imelda, of those days, had looked so pure, so utterly incapable of untruth or dishonour—with a sudden exclamation against his own weakness in recalling that picture now, he thrust it aside from his mind, and, in place of tropical foliage and brilliant sunshine on the slopes of Morne Fédon, saw again the red glow of his fire.

All—he had given her all, for this! The place among men that his work gave him, every hour that the work left him, every thought, through nine years, had been for her and her happiness—and this for his reward! It was not resentment against her that he felt, for love, such as he had given and so long implanted, does not admit of resentment against its object. He felt, rather, a bitter sense of disappointment and loss, as if she had died—no, it would have been better if she had died. Then wrath, which was of such intensity as to set him trembling, flamed up at the thought of Sanderson, the man whom he had helped, made,

trusted. There, on Sanderson, lay the guilt, and from Sanderson he would exact full payment. Yet how—how could he exact it? If he took all from Sanderson, even life itself, the taking would neither repay nor repair the loss Sanderson had caused him—the loss was irreparable, beyond avenging as it was beyond retrieving.

They had made such a tangled muddle of his life, these two, left such a mass of loose ends and futility! He could see no further purpose, beyond the darkness which enveloped him—no further use in living. For a time he sat bent forward, looking into the fire—there were so many things to do, and he could not think of them. Did they matter, after all—since this one thing was done past undoing, would any effort on his part be worth while, now?

A servant entered to make up the fire, and started at the sight of him. "We did not know you were back, sir," she said.

"No," he answered, "I did not intend you should. Never mind the fire—I can attend to it, and you needn't enter this room again to-night. But you can go and tell your mistress that I should like to see her here before she retires—as soon as possible, in fact."

He waited—perhaps it was five minutes, perhaps an hour, for time had lost its significance for him—and then Elma came. At the sound of the opening door he stood up on the hearthrug with his back toward the fire, and she, seeing his face, knew that the end regarding which Sanderson had questioned at Elgin had come. She had been

preparing for rest when the servant came with his message, and she came to him in a long, grey silk dressing-gown, open at the throat, and with the heavy, lustrous masses of her hair uncoiled, falling about her shoulders. She closed the door and waited, standing a pace inside the room.

"I sent for you because I shall sleep here to-night, and I wanted to see you first—to explain," Steele said quietly. "I took your cab at Liverpool Street, and drove back to the hotel where you stayed last night with Sanderson."

She did not answer, but, bending forward, shook her head slightly. The shining masses of her hair fell forward, making a darkness about her face—yet through it Steele saw her eyes fixed on him with steady, clear regard. She gave no sign of repentance or of fear.

"I want you to understand clearly that, after this interview, I do not wish to see you again," he went on. The effort which the words cost made his voice somewhat harsh.

"I have no right to question, or answer," she said steadily, seeing that he waited for her reply.

"Yet," he said again, "I don't wish you to think that I have come to this decision easily, Elma. What the first hour after I learned was to me you can never guess—I could have told you then, and easily, that I never wished to see you again. But that could not last—I have loved you too long to uproot it, too well not to forgive—you—though I cannot see you again. Unless you had denied it——"

She threw back her head, and her face showed

clear of the shadowing hair. "I—deny it?" she echoed, with splendid pride and all a woman's unreason. "I am a Delarey!"

"Then tell me"—he bent forward to ask the question—"was this dishonour of my name worthy of a Delarey?"

The look of pride passed, the erect figure which faced him drooped. "No," she answered, "but who shall control love, or make it obey laws? I own my sin—I am not English and cold, like you—I cannot say that I will love as reason bids, or within laws—I tell you it is past control! I stand before you guilty, and I make no plea of defence, but confess my guilt!" She stood up again, straight and proud, and her voice rang clear, passionate. "I was so lonely—all your kindness and thought never altered it, for no thought or kindness can make up for love's absence, and you know I never loved you! I went on, these last months, never thinking of you—for who thinks to remember kindness if love steps in? Guilty, but you know why I came to you—you must have known my life was empty while yours was full—and when he came——"

"Stop!" So far he had listened patiently, and with a wrinkling in the grim set of his lips which might have almost passed for a smile, but now he held up his hand to enforce her silence. "I will hear, for this once, all that you choose to say in extenuation of your fault, but not one word of him, no mention of his name—he is for me to deal with."

"Yet"—she broke in, hardly waiting for his last word—"my fault, you said? I would not say

one word in extenuation, but would have you know and understand that from the beginning the fault was mine—mine alone ! I tempted him ; I led him when a thing of which I may not speak made him less able to resist—I, and I only, am to blame.”

“ Nothing you can say will exculpate him, Elma—I cannot forget the wrong he has done me.”

“ He saved your life—have you forgotten that ? ”

“ I have remembered it, to-night, to wish that he had let me lie, rather than that I should come to an hour like this.”

She did not answer, but shook the hair about her face again, so that he saw only the suggestion of flesh tints and the shining of her eyes. Uncanny, almost unearthly she looked, but she breathed heavily, like one who has fought and lost.

“ Why, Elma ? ” Steele asked, speaking more gently. “ Why did you do it, when I loved you so—better than all else in life ? There was nothing I would not have given—nothing I would not have done . . . ”

“ Because ”—it was little more than a whisper in which she answered—“ what I was to you, he is to me.”

Steele shook his head like one who would rouse himself from a dream. “ Well, it is the end of everything, for me,” he said, rather bitterly. “ I don’t know if you will wish to go back to your home, or stay here—I shall make you a suitable allowance for keeping up your own establishment, either here or where you will. And—you know my views with regard to divorce. I shall not

alter them, for the attempt to obtain one would seem to me like freeing you to go on in your guilt."

"I know," she answered.

"Then that is all—good-bye."

"Good-bye." She bowed, turned, and went out.

He stood for a minute after she had gone, picturing her. With the thought of her fresh in his mind, as she had stood to face him—even with the admission of her guilt echoing in his ears—it seemed incredible that she should be guilty of such a sin. It was so absurdly irrational, so inconsistent with the proud loveliness which had faced him and claimed, so justly—"I am a Delarey!" Yet there, as if visible before him, lay the wreckage of his life, and he knew that he had come to an end. In the eyes of the world he could go on, and men would envy him his success—he would still be a figure in the world of commerce, but for himself . . . nothing!

He sat down again and tried to look forward, to think out and plan the things he had meant to do, but the future was a mere kaleidoscope of dark colours, a thing of no promise, a blur of destroyed hopes—anything, except incentive for living. And she had done it all—Elma had made the ruin . . .

"Oh, you Elma—you Elma! How proud of you I was—how I loved you!"

Her name, whispered, seemed to remain echoing in the room. He must leave this place now—he could not stay, for he knew that every rustle of a curtain would recall her, every shadowed doorway would vex him with the thought of her, in his

fancy standing beyond, and every footfall in corridor or on stairway would bid him know that her footstep would never sound across the threshold again. The weakness which comes even to the strong came to him then, and made torture of those hours before the dying fire.

Once, as he sat, the door behind him opened noiselessly, and Elma looked in—her face was stained with tears. Heaven knows what stirring of remorse, what minute of strong desire to make amends, lay behind her coming, or what power of fear or recognition of the action's futility restrained her at the sight of Steele. Restrained at the threshold she stood, with tear-stained face visible through the slightly opened door, looking half sadly and half fearfully at the still, bent figure before the fire. He sat, then, bent forward, with his head propped between his hands, and so absorbed in bitter thought that, as far as may be known, he knew nothing of her coming, for a tempest of wind and rain without drowned such slight sounds as she made. After a little time she drew back, closed the door noiselessly, and again Steele was alone.

He sat looking at the red coals which remained among grey ashes, seeing, as it were, away down and back into his own boyhood—the hard, lean years, ended long before he went to Grenada. And back into an apple orchard in early summer, where he, a young man, stood watching while a girl walked away, out of his life—the scent of hawthorn came back across the years, he heard the wind of that summer afternoon rustling in the

apple branches, and the songs of birds. . . . He had seen the girl again that morning, and she was a woman, with children growing up around her and a life which held promise yet, in spite of its cares. If she had chosen differently, that day in the orchard. . . . Children—promise in life . . .

“ Nell ! ” he whispered.

It was only the faint ghost of a memory, frightened away by the rustle of a falling coal among the ashes in the grate, but it was a possibility that had been once. Better if that could have been than the nine years with this splendid falsity, whom he loved yet, in spite of himself, with a love that reasoning and knowledge of her sin could not uproot. Infinitely better that, rather than this, the nine years' end.

It must be past midnight, for the last red coals of the fire were growing dull and lifeless. In the morning he would see Sanderson — Sanderson, whose treachery had robbed him of his wife and of all that made life worth living—he sat back and gripped the arms of his chair with fierce, sudden wrath. Oh, for one minute out of the years of young strength, one minute of struggle that he might beat his enemy down, grip him by the throat—one minute of strong life before he faced the years of life made weak and useless !

The wind, moaning in trees about the house, suddenly failed, and for a few minutes there was utter silence. Then a gust struck on the cedars on the lawn and swept away south-westward, a roaring, sudden blast, bearing in it a cry like that of a human voice. Lying sleepless in her bed,

Elma started up, for it seemed to her that the voice in the wind had called her name.

One of the servants, entering Steele's room in the early morning, found him sitting before the ashes of the burnt-out fire. She did not think, at first, she said—the room was warm, and she thought that perhaps he slept in his chair. It was only when she came close, and saw that he did not breathe, that she began to be afraid . . .

The specialist who had attended him for heart trouble, and whose certificate obviated the necessity for an inquest, said that Steele had died, quite painlessly, not long after midnight.

Painlessly !

CHAPTER XVII

THE WOMAN WHO WAS LIKE——

THE news of Steele's death reached Sanderson, who had gone back to Liverpool, in the form of a telegram—Elma sent it—which he found awaiting him at his hotel at the end of his day's work. He had come in feeling more than usually satisfied with himself, for, acting as his own commercial traveller, he had booked two large orders that day, but the bald, almost brutally curt announcement of the message—"William Steele died last night"—and the signature—"Elma," destroyed his complacency. He settled his hotel bill, and just managed to catch the early evening express for London.

From Liverpool to London he sat crouched and motionless in a corner seat of the train, seeing nothing of the country he passed through, hearing nothing of the sounds about him, but with his thoughts indrawn and impervious to outside influences, for the time. Here ended the phase of life which his night of transition on the heath had commenced, and, though dimly and still far off, the dawn of clear understanding evidenced its coming. Not repentance—for that was born of

realisation, not of understanding alone—but remorse, and the passing of the blind passion through which he had fallen headlong into a very pit of dishonour. The news was so unexpected, the blow so terribly sudden, that its effect on him was doubled. Like all who err through desire and the stifling of reason rather than by clear, deliberate intent, he had thought vaguely—in the rare moments when the future presented itself and he permitted his thoughts to dwell on it—that there would come a shadowy, undefined end, some day, without visible result from his acts, and Steele would never know—matters would right themselves in some manner. After the mad day and night with Elma in London, only two days ago, he had not let himself think of Steele, but in the flight which he and Elma planned then had put Steele out of his mind—refused the thought of him.

And now Steele was dead—the fact closed, rather than opened, a way for him. He remembered that, away back in the first days after Esther's death, Steele's thought of his loneliness had brought about their friendship; he recalled all that Steele had done for him: how, for no reason but that of the desire to help him on, Steele had launched him on this tide of fortune which set in so steadily. And now he understood how he, Sanderson, had repaid!

Dead, Steele could never know—he tried to comfort himself with that, to say that he would go on without fear, since cause for fear had passed with Steele's death. The effort was useless—he knew that not Steele's ignorance could palliate the injury he had inflicted, and that nothing could

excuse it. Self-condemned, he said that this hour of remorse and like hours which must follow it should make up his punishment—it was impossible that he should even glimpse the punishment before him. So, cramped and numb and wretched, he came to Euston—darkness had fallen long before—and, taking a taxi at the station, crossed to Liverpool Street. He shrank back into the corner of the cab in passing the hotel where he and Elma had stayed, only three days ago—he feared to see it, now, though but a few hours before he would have looked out eagerly, anticipating that which they had planned.

Then he wondered what Elma would do or say—what effect Steele's death would have on her? He knew that she had never cared for Steele, but surely this—the shock of it—must bring her to a pause.

Contrasting him at this point with the Sanderson of three days before, it is hardly possible to realise in him the same man.

At noon on Saturday he stood in Steele's room and looked on the face of the dead. Beside him Elma stood, paler than her wont (though that may have been an effect of the dead black in which she was attired) and quiet and slow of movement. The man whom they had wronged looked—as the servant who found him had said—as if he slept, nothing more. No trace of his last night's bitter musing remained in death.

“He was a good man,” Sanderson said, realising his own unworth by comparison.

“And we wronged him, you would say,” Elma completed for him. “It is true, but will regrets amend it? Since—since he is not here, shall we go on grieving for what is done past undoing?”

“Not here?” he asked, as if the thought were a curious one to him.

“He is not here,” she repeated. “This—it is nothing, and I know. He has gone—he is not here.”

Sanderson turned from facing the dead to look at her, but her face was expressionless as her voice. She divined his thought and answered it, though he would never have expressed the question.

“I have no tears left,” she said, and still the words were mechanical, devoid of any sign of feeling. “I have wept—not for him, for he needs no tears, but for my own guilt. Yet I care no less for you. I would not alter one day or one hour—there are two voices that call, and I hear them both. You will not understand, for it is not the same to a man. And I am afraid—I remember my dream, and though I know he is not here I am afraid.”

“Forget it, Elma,” he answered gently, realising in some measure what a storm of conflicting emotions had brought her to this immobility and restraint. “As we planned, so it shall be—let this make no difference.”

“You said—a month,” she said slowly. “I will go away for a month—quite away, where I cannot see you. Then I can come back as if—as if this had not been.”

“Yet—can we forget this?” he asked doubtfully, and looking at the face of the dead.

She covered the face and went out from the room, beckoning him to follow. "Time heals all," she said, when they had descended the stairway ; "and with you I can forget all."

She smiled, but it was a faint, cold reflection of the passion-lit smile which Sanderson remembered. Her quiet and the black robes she wore gave her a new dignity, made her look a different, colder and more stately woman, other than the embodiment of temptation he had known. He felt a sense of compassion—he wanted to comfort her, then, and, forgetful of himself, wished that he could lessen the effect of this shock on her.

"In a month," he said ; "and I will help you to forget, Elma."

Yet, under the effect which Steele's death had had on her, she was the same woman—there was no difference, save for a transient awe. Watching Sanderson as he left the house and passed through the gate, she thought again of her dream of Barbados harbour—how in the dream she had gone on homeward, leaving him, not to return to him again.

"I am afraid !" she said as she watched. "I am afraid !"

But one may question whether it were fear, or a subconscious knowledge, independent of reason, that because of her guilt in the near past she had no right to the future which she claimed ?

Brayley went *en masse* to the funeral. Some few of the better-class people—in a social sense—went out of respect for the dead and sympathy

with his widow, for the knowledge of Elma's intimacy with Sanderson—the extent of it—never reached through to the place, in spite of efforts by Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Brace to make Brayley too hot to hold her. Others there were who, like the two ladies just mentioned, went out of curiosity: they wanted to see how the widow looked in her weeds, how her loss affected her, and to be able to tell, afterward, what the show had been like. Others again there were, in clothes which had done duty for years as “Sunday best,” working men who came because the dead man had been good to them, and they felt that they owed this last act of respect to one, in losing whom they had lost a friend. And in the days which followed, as one or other of these told how William Steele had helped, quietly, in a dark hour, Brayley people came to a better conception of his worth than they had gained in his lifetime.

It is a very slight sketch of Steele that I have given here, for the quiet strength of the man, devoid of ostentation or of any striking point, give very little room for description—so much in connection with him must be understood rather than told. In comparison with the small, conventional men among whom he lived, one might almost call him great; and in recalling the disadvantages under which he commenced life, the position to which he attained, and his fitness for it, one feels that to call him a man of exceptional ability is not enough—the phrase does not convey a half of what he was. The lesson of his life needs no telling—grandly simple in his aims, and strong as simple,

his work goes on in spite of death, for he points the lesson yet.

The Monday on which his funeral took place proved a perfect spring day: there was a light west wind, there was faint sunshine over the earth, and all the promise of the year's awakening as they laid this man to sleep. Most prominent and most observed of all in the cemetery was Elma, standing beside the grave, and beside her Mrs. Gray, and behind them the little group of co-directors and employees of the firm which Steele had done so much to guide. Facing them was Sanderson and his manager, who had come out of compliment to the founder of the firm, and, around and behind these two, the many people of Brayley who had followed to the cemetery on the Rockford Road.

Sanderson stood looking at Mrs. Gray, frowning with an effort at recollection. There was that about this care-marked little woman which seemed familiar to him, though he had never seen her before. He knew that she resembled Constance, but it was not Constance of whom he was trying to think in connection with her, but somebody—somebody whom he had known. . . . There, there it was again, that trick of turning the head: somewhere he had seen it before, some one he knew had—and the way in which she looked up, suddenly, yet not hastily. The movement half recalled somebody else, but only half, and he could not place the memory. The personality of that other, whom these gestures almost recalled, eluded him.

Elma was standing still, with expressionless face and eyes—yet wonderfully beautiful, though appar-

ently so altered. It was a lifeless, apathetic beauty, for she looked as if she neither saw nor heard what passed—more like a statue graven by a master than like a living woman. So she stood until the last words had been spoken, when she shuddered as she turned away. The fear, of which she had spoken to Sanderson, remained with her.

Then the empty cemetery, idlers on the road looking through the railings, and the grave-digger shovelling in the earth—the realistic, practical side of the day's event: no more words, but a somewhat grimly suggestive act.

Recalling the man whose body they laid away that afternoon, and whom many of them forgot—as was but natural and human of them—within the week, I would echo Elma's words, "He is not here." For I think that perhaps God had need of him, elsewhere.

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Late that afternoon there gathered in the dining-room at Rockford House a little group, composed of those who had more than a passing interest in the terms of Steele's will. Stacey, who had transacted all Steele's legal business since the latter had been in a position to need the services of a solicitor, and on whose recommendation of the place Steele had first come to Brayley, read the will—stiff, solemn, professional Stacey, not the genial, talkative Stacey whom Brayley knew—the solicitor, not the man.

The document bore a date three months previous to that of its reading, and in its preamble the testator stated that it was executed in the know-

ledge that he had, at the most, only two more years to live. On this followed a list of legacies to employees in his firm, and to two servants who had been with him since he first came to Rockford House—one of these latter left the room sobbing when her name was read out. Then came a clause bequeathing all his interests in the lately formed firm of Sanderson and Steele to the managing director of the firm, John Glyn Sanderson. The recipient of the bequest gripped a chair-back and looked across at Elma when his name was read, but she did not return the glance.

Next there came a long clause, stating that whereas the testator was aware that his wife, Imelda Jeanne Steele, would not desire to reside in England after his death, he gave and bequeathed Rockford House, with all its grounds, appurtenances and furniture, to “my cousin, Mary Eleanor Gray,” together with a sum which, as then invested, yielded an income of two thousand pounds per annum, the said income to be used by the said Mary Eleanor Gray for her own needs and for the maintenance of her children, as she should see fit, and at her death to be divided among the children as she should direct, save and except that a fifth share should, at the death of the said Mary Eleanor Gray, pass to her eldest daughter, Constance Eleanor Gray. This was the first time Sanderson had heard Constance mentioned since she had left Brayley—almost the first time he had thought of her for more than six months—and he felt a little, odd thrill of apprehension when her name was spoken.

The testator further stated that, with regard to the furniture of Rockford House, he desired the recipient of this bequest to permit his wife to select and take with her any articles which, by reason of their associations or sentimental value to her, she might wish to retain.

And lastly the testator bequeathed unconditionally "to my dear wife, Imelda Jeanne Steele," the residue of his real and personal estate, comprising, after the foregoing bequests had been deducted, safe investments and cash to the total value of nearly fifty thousand pounds. Looking at Elma again, Sanderson saw that she stood, now, as she had stood beside the open grave, immobile and expressionless as stone. What did that mask hide, he wondered—was all the passion of the past months burnt out and dead, or was it merely asleep?

Later, when the many recipients of minor bequests were going out, Elma beckoned to Sanderson and introduced him to Mrs. Gray. "You will be neighbours, if only for a little time," she said to him, "so it is as well that you should know each other. Besides, you already know Constance."

"My daughter has spoken of you, Mr. Sanderson," the little woman said, regarding him gravely.

Again the half-realisation of a resemblance between her and somebody he had known came to trouble him. She was like—like—but no, that other personality eluded him. He mumbled some indistinct and formal answer, and an awkward silence followed it. Elma broke the restraint which oppressed all three.

“I should like you to think, Mrs. Gray, with regard to my husband’s bequest to you, that his wishes and mine on the subject are identical. In two days I shall be going away for a month, and if I return at all it will only be for a day or two. If possible, I should like you to come here with Mr. Gray and the children next week.”

Listening abstractedly, Sanderson marked the un-English, distinct, and separate way in which she pronounced each word, as if it were the first time he had heard her speak.

“Yes, I think we can come this week,” Mrs. Gray answered. “It will be easy to sublet our house as it is at this time of the year, and we have only to come—we need bring no furniture, unless you——” She hesitated, remembering Steele’s proviso.

“There is only one thing that I wish to take. If you will come, I will show you.”

She led the way to the drawing-room—a glance which she gave to Sanderson bade him follow—and pointed out a little occasional table which stood near the door. He remembered—it was the table against which, facing him, she had leaned on the morning after the Staceys’ dance, the morning after John Orme’s death.

“Only that,” she said; “I wish to take nothing else,” and Sanderson understood, while Mrs. Gray almost smiled at the choice, for she did not understand.

That night the little woman, travelling homeward, wondered. Had Steele found the proof he went to seek, or had he died without it? Elma’s

face told nothing, even to another woman, for it was the face of one who neither thinks nor feels. Then Mrs. Gray's thoughts passed on to her children, and the cessation of her greatest anxiety regarding them. And further, to the man who had died—even though it was for her own children, she wished that this gift could have been withheld a little longer, and that she could still think of William Steele as living. Like his thoughts on the night of his death, hers gave her a picture of an orchard, hawthorn-scented—and the songs of birds. . . . The tears had not dried on her cheeks when she reached home.

That night Elma paced up and down her room, up and down, until one would have thought the room had been a cage to her, for every turn she made was as abrupt as if the wall from which she retreated had prevented an intended step beyond that which her limit allowed. "It is my secret!" she told herself, again and again. "After, he shall know, for I cannot keep it always—but not yet!" And sometimes, remembering her dream, she would say, "I am afraid—afraid!"

That night Sanderson, lying sleepless, in thought heard Stacey's voice repeating the terms of Steele's bequest to him, over and over, and each sentence was a wound, each word a separate blow. Thus and thus had Steele thought of him, while he . . . "The act, which is its own reward——" and this was only the beginning!

Two days later, without a word to him, Elma Steele had gone none knew whither. He felt that she had done wisely, for after a month, perhaps,

the sense of guilt would in some measure have passed from him. Perhaps he could take her hand, when she came back, and look into her eyes without the feeling, akin to that of his night on the heath, that from the larger, completer knowledge to which he had gone Steele saw, and, understanding all, condemned.

THE END OF THE FOURTH PHASE

THE FIFTH PHASE

CHAPTER XVIII

AWAKENING

THE day before Elma's departure Sanderson made arrangements for putting the shares of his company on the market, but within a week he found that the trouble of issuing a formal prospectus would not be necessary, since three large shipowning firms tumbled over each other in their eagerness to buy up the whole company. Sanderson stipulated that one thousand shares should be reserved for himself, and left the man whom he had appointed to transact the business to haggle with these three and other possible customers. Although in the near future he must resign from his position as head of the firm, he did not intend entirely to abandon the business.

When he returned from London on the Thursday of that week, his housekeeper told him that the new people had arrived at Rockford House, and he knew that he would see Constance Gray again, very soon. He knew, too, that only a week had elapsed since Elma and he had parted in London—a week in time, but a long, long period in its

influence on him. The days of unreasoning action and desire were ended, now—they belonged to a phase of life on which he could look back without renewal of desire, and, in thinking of Steele, with bitter remorse. He said that the mad, intoxicating passion, which had made those days possible, slept until Elma should come to reawaken it in him—he put the thought of her aside, often and easily; for, he told himself, he had no wish to recall her as she had been, but trusted that the woman of clearer, cooler perception, who had stood with him beside her husband's body, would come to him at the month's end. Were the woman of the first days to return, embodied temptation—but he did not know what influence she would have on him. That which lay beyond her return he knew, but he never pictured it—that, like his other thoughts of her, he put aside.

Passion alone had drawn him to her, though while it lasted he would have called it love. The woman's beauty and the fascination which was hers, rather than the woman herself, had proved at first a means of forgetfulness and cessation from thought; later, he had found in her a wonderful release from slight stirring of self-accusation, as with a drug one might seek to evade realisation of the drug's effect. And passion alone is not lasting—without some sure foundation it burns out, leaving such inertness as possessed him now.

That is, for a man. Every woman is a law unto herself, and an exception to all laws governing all other women.

One thing Sanderson knew: he did not wish to

meet Constance Gray. He did not attempt to analyse the causes behind that wish—fear was among them, and the knowledge that his last words to her had implied a promise, not less sacred because not fully expressed, and a desire to avoid complete realisation of his own weakness in the months since he had made that promise. He knew that he did not wish to meet her, for, since the near past bound him to a certain course, he felt that it would be better for him to live through this month as a time of resolve to make amends, that he might go to Elma at its end relieved, in some measure, of the sense of guilt which Steele's death had impressed on him. The sophistry which gave birth to such thoughts was almost puerile, as in a later day he realised, but, governed by it now, he knew that he did not wish to meet Constance Gray again.

Perhaps because of that wish, fate ordered that these two should meet on the day after she came to Brayley. Sanderson came on her in the evening, on a meadow path which leads from the Rockford Road towards Westwood Lane. The sun had set a little time before, and a biting east wind had given place to calm when, walking quickly homeward, he passed a high hedge which barred him from sight of the path beyond, and saw her on the path a little way ahead. There was no escape, for she, hearing footsteps, turned, and then waited for him to come up with her.

“Greeting,” she said, with a slight smile. “I told you I should come back.”

Standing before her, he recalled the night on

which he had bidden her good-bye—how he had spoken her name, and—“I shall look for your coming.” He had spoken the words as a promise ; by them he had bound himself. . . . The full awakening, to which the time since Steele’s death had been but a prelude, came on him with a shock—like a brilliant light flashed in the eyes of one who has been long in a darkened room. Again he knew that through her he could regain accurate perception, as, in the first days, he had felt that in coming to her he could recover a sense of the true proportions of things after Elma had temporarily destroyed it within him. The man of the intervening months—the man who had forced himself to distorted perception in the hours on Hampstead Heath—receded and gave place to one of balanced, reason-controlled impulse. He did not attempt to understand it, but knew that if she had not gone—if only she had not gone—the things of the past months would not have been.

“It is long since you went away,” he said, answering her. He did not realise the significance of the words—that which they implied—but he knew that an immeasurably long time had passed since he had last seen her, a crowded age of happenings which she could have prevented—if only she had not gone ! Without questioning he fell into step beside her, and they walked on together.

“Seven—nearly eight months,” she computed aloud, “but it has not been long to me. I had my work, and there were no events to make the time seem long—to mark periods in it.”

"Was it interesting work?" He asked the question because he could think of nothing else.

"No—we were poor, as I told you once—and I taught in a school. There is little else for a girl to do, in spite of suffragettes' assertions." She smiled, remembering Mrs. Burrows.

"Why, what do they say about the matter?" he queried—more for the sake of hearing her speak than through any interest in the subject.

"Different things, according to the depth of the speaker's convictions, even to stating that women should contest all issues with men. Many just things concerning a woman's unjust limitations—but they confuse issues, and attempt too much. We discussed all this once before."

The words were commonplace, but her manner, that of one who tried to find an even balance and at the same time realised her own liability to err, impressed him anew with the sense of a correcting influence on himself. For a few minutes it was as if she had not gone away; he forgot the time between; life still held unshadowed promise, and Constance Gray walked beside him—he himself was free of self-inflicted bonds, save that of his promise to her, which he would keep gladly. It was a fancy, a trick of the mind, a contrast which showed him the reward of his own act as he recalled Elma and that which had caused Constance to return. Yet—it was good to have known . . . like one who had flung away a feast, and now hungered, he clutched at the crust which remained.

"You said you found teaching uninteresting—I should have thought it the reverse," he remarked.

“That word hardly describes the sense it gives. I was in a school, and had a class in which children came and went—and a child’s mind unfolds so very slowly. There was time for me to catch a glimpse of the process of unfolding—just so much that I wanted to know more—and then the child had gone. It was irritating, and the constant beginning over again with other children had a deadening effect, so that after a time I ceased to look for the glimpses I had seen at first. Then—lack of interest—I felt myself narrowing——”

“I had never thought of that side,” he confessed.

“I found it the only side. And you”—she looked at him with a smile—“you have grown prosperous, I hear. Do you remember telling me that all inventors were poor?”

“Yes—and I am an exception to the rule, in a way. Yet in another way I am infinitely poorer than—than when I told you that.”

They had come to another stile on the path, and she halted, for she had no need to go farther with him. Until he spoke the last sentence she had feared, but now she knew that he had failed—forgotten—her dream of eight months had been based on unreality—it was folly . . .

“My walk ends here,” she said; “it was only a fancy of mine, to find out where this path led. Poorer, you said?”

“In one sense,” he answered, looking full at her.

“So, perhaps, am I—by an illusion”—she returned his gaze steadily—“but then, one never expects to retain illusions permanently. Good-night, Mr. Sanderson.”

She gave him her hand, smiling in a frank, friendly way which took away the sting from the reproof conveyed by that penultimate sentence. Sanderson understood.

"You are quite right," he said gravely. "Good-night."

It was easy, then, to own his folly, but after she had gone he thought again of the time when he had first known her—his very, very few meetings with her and the influence they had had on him; the swift growth of that which had prompted his promise to her, that which Elma had struck down and stifled with the power of her beauty and fascination, but which now reared up strong and triumphing over passion . . . that purer, stronger growth which even to himself he dared not name, now. He saw himself in the first phase after Esther's death, contrasted that self with the one who had sought forgetfulness and the transient intoxication of passion with Elma Steele. In realising the future which his own acts had won, he saw that which he had flung away.

Past retrieving—nothing could undo it, nothing could avert the result. He had bound himself, in the months between her going and this time of her return, with bonds which he could not sever, though a sense within him cried out against the bonds. He would have called that sense his better self, had not a voice, like that which had spoken with him in the transition passage on the heath, bidden him remember that he had sown and must gather the harvest of his sowing. ¶

He did not want the passion which Elma had

given him—he did not want it any more. He had caught a glimpse of the man who had been before that passion altered him, and he recognised a saner, better man. He wanted now to do something in the world, to add his share to the good which is the only result of life worth remembering ; and he recognised that in yielding to temptation he had numbed his better faculties as with a drug—now that the numbing influence had passed he wanted to escape from the drug, to live free of it. Surely he had a right to ask that the man in him should be given free play, in spite of the fact that he had tried to destroy his own manhood, to atrophy the higher instincts which clamoured for expression now ?

Then the best that was in him, the very highest instinct, rose up against these flimsy sophistries and tore them to shreds—the soul of the man stood free of the mind which would perplex it, and bade him see the future as his acts had made it, inevitable. He saw that the remorse which had tortured him since Steele's death was unavailing, an expression of weakness ; he saw that of his own will he had planned a path, and must follow to its end—the higher instincts by which he had tried to excuse himself would not find expression in avoidance of the obligation he had incurred ; there came, in place of remorse, repentance, and the man awakened fully at last.

He settled it in his own mind, definitely and past retraction, he told himself, on the meadow path. There must be no more yielding of will to desire, but a steady going forward. He must bear without

flinching the bonds which he had imposed on himself, since in this he decided not for his own life alone. His duty took him to Elma, that with her he might make such reparation as remained possible, for the wrong they had done. In a month—he must go back to her in a month.

Granting the existence of a personal devil, how he must have laughed at hearing Sanderson calculate, after making definite choice of his future, that a month lay between him and the duty which he recognised as inevitable, and to be commenced at the month's end!

Sanderson and Constance met at church two days later, where the former went so seldom as to cause one to mistrust his motive for attending on that particular occasion. Coming out from the churchyard gate after the service, he stopped to speak with Mrs. Gray, and, while they stood talking, Constance came out with her two small brothers. Sanderson walked on with her and her mother—the two small boys chased each other alternately along the road, ahead of their elders, and he went with the two women toward Rockford House. Mrs. Gray asked questions regarding Steele, and told one or two incidents of his earlier life—Sanderson endured the subject perforce, and went on until they came to the gate of Rockford House.

“You'll come in to lunch, having come so far, Mr. Sanderson?” Mrs. Gray asked.

He saw Constance turn to look at him, and read that which her eyes expressed. He declined the invitation. “My housekeeper will be wondering

already as to what has become of me," he explained.

"Then you must come up to tea to-morrow or Tuesday, will you?"

"I should be pleased to come on Tuesday," he answered. "Not to-morrow—I shall not be back from London in time."

"Then we shall expect you on Tuesday."

Walking homeward by the path on which he had overtaken Constance two days before, he paused at the stile by which she had turned back—after a minute he sat down on the stile, heedless of his expectant housekeeper and of a searching east wind which neutralised the sun's effect. A long time he sat still, body and mind alike inert, for there followed on the decision and strong resolve of two days before a reaction, a sense, which admitted of no thought nor reasoning, of the futility of his life.

He sat on the stile, staring gloomily along the path, not conscious of the things visible to external sight, but oppressed by the conviction that he had made a muddle of life, and that the rest of his days must be spent in retrieving his fault, in expiation . . .

The phase may have been wholly reactionary, and again there may have rested upon him the first faint shadow of a coming event.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BEGINNING OF REPRISAL

THE dispenser of blessings who had Sanderson in charge was particularly energetic on Tuesday afternoon, for no less than four people, in addition to him, chose that as the occasion of their first call on "the new people." There was, first of the four—but far from foremost—the vicar of Rockford, a flabby old bachelor, whose flock had cause for gratitude in that Sunday came but once a week, and still greater cause in the infrequency of his visits to their homes. There was Mrs. Stacey, who, feeling that since the new people were relatives of Steele they must not be neglected, came to inspect them that she might be in a position to report on their fitness to enter Brayley society—or their lack of fitness, as the case might be. There was Mrs. Burrows, who maintained undiminished devotion to the Cause, and who came armed with various tracts and a copy of a weird publication, which, disguised as a weekly newspaper, presented all the facts for and none of the facts against female suffrage. Lastly—the visitors are taken in the order in which they arrived, not that of merit—our old friend Mrs. Wilson, attired in black silk

which rustled like a summer shower in a wood, came to spy out the land and give the impression of a female inspector of nuisances smelling for faulty drains. One always gained that impression when Mrs. Wilson called.

Given the presence of these four, and given the fact that Mrs. Burrows talked the other three out of patience, and had Mrs. Gray at her mercy after they had gone, one conclusion only is possible—Constance was eventually left with the task of entertaining Sanderson. And it came to pass in course of time that Constance, two of her younger sisters, and Sanderson went out into the meadow which slopes away from the gardens—this happened after tea, when Mrs. Burrows had fixed Mrs. Gray in a way which admitted of no escape, and had commenced a recital of the piled-up and pressed-down wrongs under which long-suffering Woman conducted the struggle against the tyrant Man.

The presence of the children made a new atmosphere at Rockford House, and the change impressed Sanderson, showed him the desirability of life's domestic side. There were so many small interests, evidently, with which to fill time's odd corners; so many little things at which to laugh—a sane, healthy laughter. It was a state of which to be envious, a full life. . . . He found himself making comparisons between this state and his own, and came to the conclusion that he had taken life too seriously. These people found so much of interest, so many tasks which became mere pleasure in their accomplishment. Something of this he attempted to express to Constance in the meadow.

"Perhaps it is so," she answered reflectively, "though one always sees one's own state of mind as normal, and considers all other states abnormal. Perhaps we have been exceptionally fortunate, too—we have always had mother to help us through our little worries. She taught us to laugh at them."

"And the younger ones have had you," he commented.

The two younger sisters, understanding that Constance was talking of things which had little interest for them, went on, and left her standing, facing Sanderson, on the knoll with which he always associated Elma Steele. The contrast between the two women—for he would have called Constance all of a woman, in spite of her youth—struck him now. The one had been swayed and governed by emotion, while this other governed emotion and lived by reason—yet he divined that she, too, felt deeply.

"It would be equally true to say that I have had them," she answered, after a pause.

"I could wish"—he hesitated, as if doubtful whether to voice the thought—"you remember telling me before you went home last year, that you thought you might have done good by staying here?"

"Yes—I know now that I could."

"I wish—I have wished since I met you last week—that you had not gone."

"Why?" She looked at him steadily, and challenged the wish in a way he could not quite understand.

"Because you warned me—had you stayed I should have remembered the warning."

"Then you forgot?" Again the question sounded like a challenge, and the words almost harsh.

"Yes." He spoke the one word in a manner which expressed a great regret, and looked away from her. She turned to watch a storm which, miles away, came out from the sunset and swept eastward over the country before them. West of the storm was sun and clear sky.

"Until the day of Steele's death, I forgot. There were other things—other factors beside the one you saw . . . when I was blind. If only you had not gone!"

"If I could have done so, I would have spoken more plainly then," she answered. "As it is—what is done, is done, and regrets are useless. Yet I feel glad—almost glad—that you are man enough to own your fault."

The bitterness of that last sentence startled him, and again he could not understand.

"Does it matter much, or take much manhood?" he asked, rather wearily. "After all——"

But Constance was looking at the storm in the valley, and he could not see her face. He let the sentence remain incomplete, and stared, moodily, at the storm as it passed on.

"No, it does not matter," she answered, "and I don't see why you should have told me that."

"Because I thought—when you warned me——" Again he hesitated, as if the thought were better

left unspoken. Constance swung round suddenly to face him.

"You remember it now," she said—"do you remember your own last words to me, that night before I went?"

He bent his head—the question was an accusation. "Would to God you had not gone!" he said.

"For eight months—was it so easy to forget?"

"There were other causes—other causes greater than the one you know—call it madness rather than forgetting." He spoke the words as a plea. "Now, I begin to pay."

"I?" she questioned, with bitter earnestness, and yet again he failed to understand.

"Yes, I," he said. "In a month I shall go to her—you and I will not meet again, after . . ."

"Why?" And as when she had uttered it before, the one word was a challenge. He clenched his fists unconsciously—every nerve within him set itself against the answer she demanded, yet he knew that for his own sake, to keep him to the way he had planned, he must speak.

"Because—the night before Steele's death—Elma——" He paused irresolutely. Where was the need that he should tell this, to her?

"Go on," she bade, in the pause. "That was the night after she left Ashfordbury to come home here."

"She did not come," Sanderson went on. A sound as of the beating of great waves was in his ears, and words were hard to utter. "She came to me, in London. . . . We planned—

that in—in a month we two . . . would go, together.”

He waited for her to turn and go, but she stood still. The noise as of waves passed.

“Had any other told me, I should never have forgiven you for withholding it,” she said. “You see, I remembered your promise to me—the one you broke, and since I made an ideal—I wondered. I knew that you two—that Elma spent that night away from home. But I wanted you to tell me—not anybody else.”

“Why—then you——” He took one step forward, and there was hope in his eyes again. “Constance?”

He did not ask how she knew—she said no word of Steele’s visit to the house at Ashfordbury and the discovery he made there, for that was not hers to tell, but Elma’s. To him the point, that she knew of that last day with Elma, was so small in comparison with this other wonderful thing that he overlooked it. In realising the payment he must make for his sin, he had overlooked the possibility that she, too, might be involved in that payment—until her last sentence told him.

“Well, is it so strange?” she asked, in a hard, dogged way. “Consider what my life was—remember the night before I left, the night when you told me you would wait for me and look for my coming, when you promised—to me it was a promise. I knew—I wanted no word from you till I should come again, for there was nothing more you could say—I knew—it is only eight months since you promised—and I——”

He waited, conscious of what the eight months had held for him—a consciousness which was like the searing of a red-hot iron.

“I wanted you to justify yourself by—as you did just now—not to justify what you have done, for nothing can excuse it or alter what you must do now. But—that you should prove there was some man left to you, in spite of——”

“Some ? ” he echoed, lashed by the bitter scorn of that last sentence—and again—“Some ? ”

She smiled with her lips, but her eyes had no part in it. “If you think I judge harshly, surely you can find a reason for my harshness,” she said. “I don’t know men, nor how it is with them, but for a woman—for me—I had set up an ideal. For eight months no word came to me, and my ideal grew into its place. If I find the real so much less——”

“There were other causes,” he interrupted desperately. “Won’t you understand—there were other causes, and though I have no excuse I had no choice. Now—is it nothing to you that I shall pay ? All my life must be spent in payment, though I’d give half of it to stay here.”

“Should I stand here with you now, if that were nothing to me ? ” she asked, and the question answered itself. “But how—how will you pay ? ”

“I shall go to her—it is the only way.”

“You—will go—to her ! ” She echoed the words thoughtfully—she wanted to fathom his motive, to understand all of the force which had prompted this decision.

“Remembering that if I had waited—if I had

kept the promise I made you—I could have gone a better way,” he ended.

“Ah!” She understood, fully. “Then—no matter what life gives me, I shall never quite forget, for I can still keep—some—of my ideal.”

Notwithstanding the resolve he had just expressed, he saw the woman whom he might have known, the wealth of tenderness which was hers and which these last words made visible, and with the sight came momentary weakening, brief struggle, and realisation of the fact that only by adherence to his decision could he keep the place she gave him. So much he had flung away, so little remained—yet he knew that his act had rewarded itself, and no more.

“I think—it must be the same with all women,” Constance said musingly. “We make ideals, gild mud, and worth counts for nothing—only something says that one man is the man—or was I a lonely sort of fool? Yet I would have thought it impossible that you——”

“There were other causes,” he said again—“one that I cannot tell—even you.”

“I don’t ask,” she answered quickly. “I’m nothing to you—why should you tell—me?”

“Perhaps that’s true—yet—if for once in my life I plan to do right instead of as I would—will you take away the very little reward I can gain by telling me you are nothing?”

“But think”—she turned toward him and smiled—“consider the position. You and I have met a half-dozen times, more or less, and I know—in knowing that Elma went to you in London—

all that you are. You spoke one sentence—two—to me, and I was foolish enough to look on them as promises—and then, if they were promises, you broke them. The practical side forbids.”

“It’s true,” he answered moodily.

“And my folly in thinking—oh, what a fool I was! What a fool!”

The immeasurable scorn of her own weakness was like a lash to him, and he could find no answer.

“I had so little beyond work that I lived in dreams”—she spoke more to herself than to him—“and in dreaming I made a man in place of you—looked forward . . . to find this at the end! And I would have given, gladly, for the man I thought you——”

“Do you think I cannot see what I have lost?” he interrupted.

“I cannot separate them, you and the man I made,” she went on. “I have tried, but you and he are one—there lies the reward you asked. That much you gain, and, if it is anything to you—but why tell you? Only that I feared you would forget—knowing her, and having seen you, I feared—yet I hoped, too. But she is strong—and now you go to her.”

“I go to her,” he answered gravely. “There is no other way.”

“Now”—she took one step forward, then turned back to him with a smile—“we’ll go and talk to the children, and—I shall remember that you could come and tell me of the night before Steele’s death.”

“I could not do otherwise. Because of the night before you went away—the promise I made you then—I stand for you to judge.”

She turned again, to go where the two younger girls were playing.

“I am no longer capable of just judgment,” she said.

CHAPTER XX

THE VICAR INTERRUPTS

THERE came about a definite growth in Sanderson in the weeks which followed on Steele's death. Each incident of the preceding months had caused an impression, and though in the time of action these impressions had been on his subconsciousness, rather than on the conscious man, the added experiences had waited—if the figure of speech is admissible—a fitting time to manifest themselves in modifying him. Now, the later and contrasting influences to which he was subjected in this period of pause—though not of inertness—combined their weight with that of hitherto subconscious growth, and moulded him into the man of the last phase.

Be it remembered that he lived, during these weeks, with the ashes of a burnt-out passion, and the knowledge that its result was yet to face. If any spark of flame had remained among the ashes, his afternoon in the meadow with Constance had extinguished it, and he stood to face the future with the knowledge that his own acts had taken away more than they had given. The cause of all—that other cause with which he had striven

to make Constance judge less harshly, though not to justify himself—had ceased to exist; he told himself that John Orme had met deserved death, and, believing this, found no fear, nor any need of forgetfulness. As for the future which he faced, he had gained sufficient strength of character from the widely contrasting influences of the past year to realise that it was of his own shaping, and because of the woman who had made possible that afternoon in the meadow he would not attempt to evade or alter it. Because he had known her—because, that afternoon, he had seen . . .

One realises, in surveying the incidents in which Constance had taken part, hitherto, that she has been a shadowy, half-defined figure, an influence rather than an assertion of personality. But now, through these evidences of change and growth in Sanderson, she comes forward into clear focus, quiet, strong, and flung up in sharp relief against the background of this life which she influenced from complexity to a single aim. In the first days she had constructed an ideal, and with it had gone back, a girl, into a round of uneventful work—a forcing-house for the growth of ideals and illusions, since actual and eventful life had no part there. Such a mind as hers refused to find its all in her work, and, lacking other realities, made scope among her ideals. She returned, a woman, at a point which admitted of the shattering of her ideal, yet which, by reason of the view it gave, lent sufficient appearance of strength to the reality to allow of her reconstructing, into somewhat different form, the fragments of that which she lost by returning.

Reconstruction was made possible by Sanderson's approaching departure, and by that alone—the point cannot be insisted on too strongly. Knowing that he was about to pass out from her life, she saw him as one who recognised his own violation of law, and had sufficient strength to face his self-imposed sentence. Whatever she may have dreamed, whatever hope she may have nursed through the months of illusion, she could be nothing to him now, and that fact invested him to her sight with a certain attraction, such as is always an attribute of a thing unattainable. She had seen, in the meadow, that which might have been if she had not gone ; she had seen that the real man was hers, in spite of the fascination through which Elma had caused him to yield passing allegiance to herself ; and she, Constance, stood now at that point in life at which an illusion may count almost equally with a reality, in its influence on her.

Had it been possible for him to let Elma go, to stay here in touch with her after Elma had gone, there would have arisen in her resentment against the weakness which had caused his sin, anger at the breaking of the promise he made on the night of their parting, and distrust, perhaps, of a man who had once fallen before temptation. But now, she knew, he stood sacrificing desire to right, offering, in reparation for the wrong of months, all the years that he had left—and, greatest factor of all, he stood in her sight for days only, not for such time as would admit of resentment or distrust. Very few days remained in which she could see and speak

with him ; and once he had gone, she knew she would see him no more.

Beyond question she was self-deceiving, in a measure, since the Sanderson whom she saw was hardly the real man, though nearer to reality than the man who had been in the time between his night on the heath and the day after Steele's death. She comes into clear view as a woman somewhat lacking in feminine complexity, for, like Steele, she had simple, earnest belief in life's ultimate object rather than in its more immediate gains—the belief which makes for greatness—and she clung to an idea once formed. The weakness Sanderson had evidenced might have caused another woman to fling him aside with contempt ; but, influenced by the fact that the day of farewell, so near now, was a result of his late-wakened strength, she retained belief in him—more than belief.

And there was use for him in the retention of their friendship, for she could aid him in the way he saw as right. No word from her would tempt him to stay, and, except for that hour in the meadow, no sign would escape her to give him cause for thinking that his going meant aught to her. He must go—the fact was patent enough—and after he had gone, she knew it would be as she had said : no matter what life might hold for her, she would never quite forget. Little enough she had to remember—at the thought, in some lonely hours, the strength of the woman and the passion that is in every woman wakened and cried out against the future. So little she had asked, not a god or a hero, but just an imperfect man who had owned his need

of her, who might have been strong with her—they two might have made a whole of some worth—and this one thing was denied her! All that she had had was dreams of him, in the past; all that remained to her now was the dream of a possibility that had been destroyed. And in these hours she rebelled against the emptiness of dreams—Sanderson would go on his way because it was right that he should go; she would aid him in his going, so far as was possible, because it was right; but after, when he had gone . . . life was so cold and empty a thing, if its romance must be built up of dreams alone.

So, shadowed faintly hitherto, Constance Gray comes forward from the obscurity of a minor part to almost central prominence: simple of aim, strong in the repression of passion which proved the completeness of her womanhood, and, through Sanderson, in clear view at last.

They met at times during the month of Elma's absence, and both took heed to speak of only everyday things, of happenings of the time, of people whom Sanderson knew, and whom Constance was beginning to know. Little that admits of detailed record arose out of these meetings, until the last of them took place—except that Sanderson acquired a habit of looking for the tall, slight, black-robed figure when he was out for walks, and that Constance learned to expect him to turn up at some point, when she went out with the children or, more rarely, alone. Within a fortnight from the Tuesday which both regarded as a marked day in their lives, they

had become good friends, with a sex-ignoring, cheery friendship which admitted of argument on points of difference, and frank criticism of each other's views. Inevitably, this was a pose, a veneer covering away the things which must not be allowed to come into sight again; but, so far as may be judged, they resolved independently of each other to ignore the future, and made good the present—until the last of these days of pause and imperceptible growth. Neither spoke of Elma or of any subject which would rouse thought of that which must happen at the month's end, and they were careful, to an extent which an outsider might have found amusing, to keep to subjects of mainly impersonal interest.

Then the last day. It followed on two days of steady rain, and dawned with a warm gale from the south-west, a gusty rage of wind which tore down branches from ancient elms and set vibrating some of the jerry-built villas of Brayley. Sanderson went out into the height of this gale early in the sunless afternoon, and came on Constance at a point on the Rockford Road at a point where, high up above the surrounding country, the wind had full power over her. She stood alone, looking over a gate to the valley and two rivers north-westward of her, and the wind tangled some small, loose strands of her uncovered hair. Strong, she looked, as she leaned against the wind, glad of its freshness, and untouched by care—one who faced life willingly, with self-confidence sufficient to enable her to grapple with fate and master it. For the wind had given her of its strength and freedom, and,

standing thus, she expressed realisation of the gift as she smiled a greeting to Sanderson.

"I hoped to meet you," he remarked, by way of answer to her smile; "though, in a way, there's nothing new about that. You seem to like being blown about."

"I do," she confessed; "though I'm afraid some of my prim and proper acquaintances would be rather scandalised if they came along this road just now. Is it a sin to take one's hat off, in a wind like this?"

"It depends on the sinner," he answered gravely, removing his own hat. "I think the wind is worth the risk, though."

They stood silent for a time, looking westward over the country. Then, leaning over the gate, Constance pointed out some freshly disturbed earth in the field before them.

"It was a mole," she explained. "I saw him working. He has upset a dozen plants of corn—I saw them turn over as he burrowed under them."

"You must have stood very still," Sanderson commented; "they take fright at the slightest sound."

"I was thinking—of my brother," she said slowly.

He smiled. "I didn't think either of the young scamps bore any resemblance to a mole," he remarked.

"But it wasn't the mole, and it wasn't the young scamps. I was thinking of the one who is dead. I know—thoughts like that ought not to come into such a day as this, but——"

"You spoke of him that day when I patched your bicycle tyre," Sanderson said thoughtfully.

"You remember?" she asked, as if surprised.

"Quite well—all you said. But you said then that he might come back."

"He has"—she hesitated, as if not knowing how best to express a thought—"died since that time. We learned—a few weeks after I went home, quite accidentally."

"Then you knew nothing of it at the time?"

"Nothing. I had meant to——" Again she hesitated, and Sanderson waited, puzzled by her manner. It was not like Constance to hesitate over anything.

"Eight years ago," she went on, as if completing a thought. "He was young and wild—we never learned all. But he forged a cheque of his employers, and was found out—that much we knew. They had no mercy—he was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment, and my father forbade us ever to speak of him again. I think—except when mother and I learned he was dead—to-day is the first time I have spoken of him for years."

"And after the twelve months?" Sanderson asked, understanding that though she had not spoken of this black sheep she had retained all her affection for him.

"He went abroad——" She broke off suddenly, and, picking up the hat which lay at her feet, commenced to fasten it on. "It's the vicar," she said, "and I look like a tousled dairymaid. So much for a tempting wind!"

Sanderson smiled. "So much for a fear of the proprieties," he dissented. "The vicar won't eat you for being out with your hat off, and you're not six hundred yards from home."

"Seven," she disagreed, "on a public highway, within possible view of every worshipper of the proprieties." She twisted loose strands of hair and tucked them out of sight beneath the hat. "Do I look respectable now, from a man's point of view—fit to meet a vicar?"

"From my point of view you looked better before this panic started."

"Well, the vicar is shortsighted, I know," she concluded, by way of self-consolation, just as the reverend gentleman came within speaking distance. He gave them a cheery salutation, halted for a minute to speak of the weather, and passed on. They watched him for a time as he went toward Rockford, and then Constance, turning full into the wind, spoke again.

"It's good to live on a day like this," she said.

"In spite of hats and vicars, and propriety?" Sanderson asked.

"In spite of everything. I shall not enjoy the summer weather as I do this."

At that hint of the future Sanderson remembered, and took a card from his pocket. "I told you I hoped to see you to-day," he said, with the abruptness with which one introduces an undesired subject. "It was because of this."

He held out the card, and she read an address at Hythe. There was other writing beneath the

address, but she did not read it—she recognised Elma's handwriting.

"Let us walk on a little—anywhere," she said, and so different was her tone from that of a minute before that it might have been another woman who spoke.

They went on away from Rockford House, down from the crest of the rise where she had stood, and as they walked she sought the shelter of the windward hedge, that she might avoid the strength of the gale. The animation which had lighted her face, when she spoke of the day and the influence of the wind, died out; she walked on steadily, but spiritlessly. Down in the shelter of an elm grove which stood to windward of the road Sanderson halted, and she, halting too, faced him.

"I am going to her, to-morrow," he said. "She will come back here for two or three days, and then go on to Grenada. A fortnight later I shall follow, unless——"

He seemed to wait for her to complete the sentence, but she said no word.

"Unless——" he said again.

"There is no alternative," she answered, in an expressionless manner, "nor any other way. Let me keep—that which I have. You see, I cannot keep it unless you go."

For a minute he stood looking at her, breathing audibly, and realising the penalty which his own act involved, the full life from which, for the sake of blind desire, he had barred himself. Once before they had stood like this, and he remembered it now.

"If only you had not gone!" he said.

"Why recall it?" she asked, half with impatience and half with regret.

"Don't think I shall shirk the fate I made," he went on, as if to refute an accusation. "I shall take it up from the day I sail, and shall not look back—because of you."

"Yet—it's an odd position—because of me you look on it in this way," she commented, summoning up a smile at the dual result of her influence.

"After she has gone"—he persisted in his own thought without heeding her comment—"I want to see you once more before—before I follow. You—as I have seen you to-day. Will you promise it?"

Desire bade her grant the request, but she knew another prompting force of equal strength, and of the two was born sudden, brief anger. "Do you think hours like this are play, to me?" she asked bitterly.

He started at the depth of feeling which the words revealed, but did not answer.

"No," she said, more gently. "Because you must follow, you have not the right to ask. Go, to her—there is no other way."

Before he could find words to answer, she turned and left him. Watching her, he saw that she kept under the lee of the hedge that the wind might not reach her, and that she walked steadily, like one setting out alone on a long journey. From the crest of the rise where they had stood together she looked back, and, seeing that he had not moved, drew herself up, standing full in the wind,

and waved her hand in token of farewell. Then, turning, she sought the shelter of the hedge again, and passed on out of his sight.

Thereat he, too, turned, and went on his way steadily, like one who sets out on a long journey alone.

CHAPTER XXI

THREE INTERVIEWS

THE wind of the preceding day had given place to stillness when Sanderson came to Hythe, and made his way to the address which Elma had sent him. There they told him that she had gone out, but had left word in anticipation of his coming. He would find her down on the beach, out toward the rifle ranges which lie southward from the town.

He went down toward the beach. Noon had passed, but he felt no sense of hunger or fatigue as he went on his errand. The afternoon was grey and still, with such a stillness as is sometimes described by old country folk as that of a "growing day"—such a stillness as he had known, one afternoon, at Elgin. He noted the noise made by his own footfalls on the shingly beach, and disliked it. Why had she chosen such a place as this ?

Sullen grey rollers thundered in near him as he walked, caused, perhaps, by some far-off storm of the preceding day. The sight of the sea brought back a memory of Esther's death, a sudden stab of useless longing to see her again, and then a thought of John Orme. In a vague way Sanderson

questioned if he had had the right to judge Orme, since he himself was not guiltless. He remembered his own oath—"God do so to me, and more, if ever I wrong a woman and desert her as he did." The question of his right to judge had begun to grow insistent, and to trouble him, when he saw Elma a little way ahead, seated on the shingle. She stood up at his approach, and waited.

For the first time he was able to observe her without bias—the passion which, hitherto, had coloured his view of her would never waken again, and he saw her as he saw other women, with no stirring of emotion. Yet he owned to himself that she was wonderfully beautiful, and realised anew that she conveyed an impression as of something foreign, alien from this place and from all places he knew. Steele had realised this, in forecasting that she would desire to go back to her own place and people after his death.

"I have waited years, in this month," she said, holding out her hand. "I did not think time could pass so slowly. Was it long to you?"

"Not so long as to you, I think," he answered. "I had many things to do. Shall we go back—away from the sea?"

"But I like the sound of it," she objected. "Why do you wish to go away from it?"

"I have never cared to hear it since Esther died," he answered gravely.

She took his arm and turned away shoreward. "I did not think," she said.

They went up through the quaint old town and out to the hills beyond, not speaking, except when

once Sanderson asked Elma if she cared to go on. A sense of gravity oppressed them both, for this day made a new beginning, and both realised it. High up on a lonely path they paused by a common impulse, and Elma looked back.

"I shall be so glad to leave it," she said. "In another month I think I should have grown old, here. I want to go on—back to warmth and sunlight, to grasp and have. . . . That was why I wanted you to come to me on the beach—in the open——"

Smiling, as in the time past, she faced him, but the grace and beauty which he saw brought no answering smile to his face. Knowing as he did that duty must prompt him to a semblance of desire, always, he realised the difficulty of maintaining a lifelong pose.

"You will soon find sunlight and warmth, now," he said.

"And you—and home," she completed, "but I want you most. Will you ever understand how I care, I wonder—how all that I have is yours—all that I am is yours?"

Her voice changed to a sudden expression of passion—it was the repressed longing of the past month in a sentence, and Sanderson felt half afraid, knowing that he could not rise to adequate reply.

"But you are so quiet," she said again, suddenly observing his abstraction. "Is it—dear, I want you to teach me to forget, and must I teach you?"

He took her hands and held them. "If I fail you, Elma, tell me, and I will try to make amends. Perhaps I'm over-tired to-day, perhaps——"

“What is it—you are not the same—what is it?” she asked, looking at him perplexedly.

He shook his shoulders as if he would shake off a thought. “Nothing,” he said, “or a mood that will pass presently. I thought, to-day, of Orme.”

It was a mere excuse, but it contented her. “Why?” she asked. “Why, since you were right—why think of him now?”

“Was I right?” he queried in response. “Has any man the right to judge and condemn like that?”

“Dear—my dear—in my eyes you were right—to me you are more because you had strength to judge.”

“And weakness to fall to a like level—why does no man come forward to judge me?”

Brooding, self-absorbed, he did not see how the words stung her, nor realised that they made an accusation of guilt in her. She withdrew her hands from his and made no answer.

“I think that shadow will never pass, Elma,” he said.

“His shadow?” she asked, knowing that there could be only one alternative.

“His shadow,” Sanderson echoed moodily.

He turned, looking seaward along the path by which they had come. Far out over mid-channel a ray of sunshine, falling from a rift in the clouds, touched the waters, striking downward like a pointing finger athwart the grey sky. So still was the day, so heavy were the waves, that even at the distance at which they stood the roar of breakers was

faintly audible. Sanderson moved again abruptly, and drew Elma close to him.

"I'm somewhat selfish," he said, with awkward tenderness. "It's a fault you must forgive, Elma. I take you into my life to-day to hold as I hold you now—if I have failed to-day I will not fail you again. As you said—all that I have and am is yours—is it enough?"

She laughed, a happy little laugh, and nestled close to him. "All I ask," she answered.

Yet, walking back toward the town, she looked at him from time to time as if she sought something, and, finding it lacking, would not question openly regarding it. He was not the same—the impassioned words and eloquent silences of the man she had known were different from this—almost apathy. This man was cold, quiet and cold—stronger, one who would guide rather than be guided, but not the man she had known. Once she stopped and looked up at his face in her abrupt, foreign, pretty way.

"Were you thinking of me?" she asked, with a smile.

"Of you, and our future," he answered, smiling back at her.

But she knew that, not long since, a kiss would have answered such a question. Very evidently this was not the man she had known.

He went back home that night, knowing that on the morrow she would follow to spend five days at Rockford House before going out to Grenada. They had arranged that he should

go out by the next boat, a fortnight later, to join her.

Now, with this definite settling of his life—for it meant no less—the future stood up real before him, and in its reality hard, a bar between him and use or purpose. Was it right, he questioned now, that he should go out away from all things which made life worth its effort, and should become a drone in the sun, an uxorious item rather than a man? For this result he saw as inevitable: uprooted like a plant from the soil in which it has grown, and set down in a land where men of his kind were not needed, how should he find heart to work as he had worked here?

So he questioned while the night held, for in the night a man is weakest. Dawn showed him that all these questionings were parts of a cloak under which he hid one other—he desired to stay because of the woman who had bidden him go, whose influence had wakened him to the knowledge that he must go. Undisguised thought of her was a spur to urge him on, rather than a rein to hold him back, for he remembered watching her as she had walked up the hill away from him—he knew that, though she had forgiven his greatest fault, she would withdraw her forgiveness if he attempted to avoid that fault's legitimate result. As she had said, there was no other way.

Once, in those five days, he went up to Rockford House in the afternoon, and Willie, the youngest boy, announced him resentfully as “the man what never brought no sweets.” Constance was away in London with her father, and Mrs. Gray received

him. He found that Elma had made no secret of the fact that he was following her to Grenada.

"They'll miss me in Brayley," he remarked to Mrs. Gray, by way of comment. "I've been a little gold mine to scandal circulators, this last year."

"Ma, what is scandal?" Willie asked.

"Scandal"—Sanderson answered for her—"is telling the truth before it happens, Willie." He took a packet of sweets from his pocket. "You've been guilty of it yourself—catch!"

He tossed the sweets over to the youngster, who caught them and looked shamefaced. "Fank you, Mist Sanderson," he said, and retired under a table to investigate the package.

"But it wasn't the truth," Mrs. Gray objected.

"No," Sanderson answered composedly. "It usually happens that it isn't."

He looked at Elma, who had listened without offering to contribute to the conversation. "Thinking?" he asked, with a smile.

She nodded. "You have grown so much older," she explained. "I cannot—I think you are not the same."

"I'm not," he agreed. "Think of my added responsibilities, and the different life I have to look forward to. Isn't that enough to make a man older, Mrs. Gray?" Speaking only half seriously, he turned to the latter lady with disconcerting suddenness to ask the question.

"Or to make him young," she suggested.

As she answered she moved her head to look at him in a way which made a gesture, and recalled

to him the irritating consciousness that she resembled some one he had known, some one whom he could not remember or place in connection with her. The elusive likeness perplexed him until he rose to go.

Elma went with him a little way along the road. "Because I shall not see you again here," she said as they passed out through the gate. "I shall not see you again until you come to me."

"It is not long to wait," he reminded her.

"Not long?" she echoed, with sudden impatience, "when every day is a day wasted—every hour without you one which I would not live? Two months ago, would you have said that it is not long?"

"Two months ago I looked forward to days only—now I look forward to certainty for life," he answered, evading the direct question.

"But differently—you look forward differently," she urged. "You grow like—like him."

He knew that she referred to Steele, and wished inwardly that there were more truth in her words than he could admit. "What would you have?" he asked. "I accept the fact that I shall come to you—the only difference is that there is no uncertainty now, and no unrest. I shall care for you, Elma, always, and—don't you see that it's best to make oneself wait patiently, since a few days will put an end to the waiting."

"Perhaps," she said doubtfully, only half satisfied by his manner.

A little farther along the road she stopped. "I must turn back, now," she explained. "I shall

not see you again in England—I wish to go from here alone.”

“You don’t wish me to come down to Southampton with you ? ” he queried, surprised.

“No ”—she spoke with sudden, earnest gravity—“I want you to come to me—there, in Grenada—that we may begin again. Though I have sinned, it was because I have loved no man but you—I want you to forget the sin and remember only that I loved you, when you think of—of that time. And that there, with you—since the day when I first spoke with you I have wished that it might come to pass, and I pray for it, now. And I want you not to judge me, but to remember that I am not English, not one to wait and think, or perhaps I should not have tempted you. I tell you these things because I shall not see you again till you come to me in Grenada. Now——”

She drew his face down and kissed him on the forehead. “It is not long—good-bye,” she said, and turned to go.

As she turned, a droning exhaust horn warned them of an approaching motor, and Steele’s big car, which Elma had asked Mrs. Gray to accept as a parting gift from her, came into view with Constance and her father seated in it. The driver pulled up beside Sanderson and Elma, at a word from Constance.

“Just in time, Mrs. Steele,” Gray said ; “we can save you from walking home.”

But Elma stood looking at Sanderson, who was looking at Constance. A woman is quick to read and understand, and that minute of pause made

clear many things. At its end Elma moved toward the car.

“Yet the distance was hardly worth stopping for,” she said, as Sanderson opened the door of the Limousine for her to enter. “I think—I think it would have been better if you had gone on.”

CHAPTER XXII

BEFORE THE ALTAR

HAVING packed all personal belongings which he intended to take with him, and sold all the rest, Sanderson stood in his sitting-room one morning in May and looked about him. His long association with this little cottage made the actual departure from it somewhat of a wrench ; so many years he had spent here, so many dreams had come to nothing, and so few had materialised, since he and Esther had first come to live here. The contents of the trunks he had packed and sent away would never look the same, elsewhere—to-day made a definite end of the old order of things, for him.

There remained, however, one thing which he must do before leaving the cottage. The removal of the carpet from the floor disclosed one square of board which was screwed down, not nailed as were the rest. Sanderson unfastened the screws with a strong pocket-knife which he always carried, and which contained, in addition to its blades, a screwdriver. Lifting the board away, he took from the cavity beneath it an automatic pistol, which he placed in an inner pocket of his overcoat. Then he screwed down the board again, completing his

task with about five minutes to spare before the arrival of the local carrier, who came to take the last items of his baggage to the station. When the carrier had gone, Sanderson made his way to one of the inns in the village, where he had lunch. He intended going up to London by an afternoon or evening train, thus allowing himself ample time to rise late on the following morning and catch the "boat special" from Waterloo.

In the afternoon he went out and followed the path which leads to the summit of the Castle Hill, whence he looked down on the village which had housed him all his life. Down in the High Street men and women went about their business as usual; no one man or woman there cared aught that this one unit was to be withdrawn from among them, nobody noted his going. He realised that his life here must have been singularly ineffectual, since he was of such trifling interest to the place. Either with him or without him they would go on . . . he was just an unconsidered item, no more. Then he wondered whether Elma's coming into his life had caused this. Surely, if she had not come and centred all his interest in herself . . . he fell into a reverie of indefinite speculations, a maze of undirected thought in which was neither profit nor use. Rousing again to a sense of his surroundings, he looked out over the valley which stretched away north-westward, reminding himself that he would see it no more. Quiet and very fair the corn lands and meadows lay under spring sunshine, and barge sails on the river stood out sharply, red against green background, as he had

known them from childhood. These things remained almost changeless—change was for him, for he had come to an end, here. On the morrow he must face utter change, begin anew with nothing left—for Elma was no part of this life, but alien from it as was all that he must take up. Yet—it was a sudden resolve—in spite of the denial Constance had given him, he would see her once more before he made an end.

So he looked out across the valley again, as if he would fix a picture of it in his mind, and then descended from the hill. He walked up the Rockford Road to the white gate of Rockford House, but Willie, whom he found playing by the gate, told him that sister Connie was not there. She had gone to Brayley church, “deckilatin’,” Willie said.

Sanderson remembered as he went back that the vicar had told him, when he paid a farewell visit to the vicarage, of the approaching day of the saint after whom the church was named, and how that the building was always decorated for special services on that day. He went up the little paved pathway which leads through the churchyard, and, entering the church, saw Constance standing before the altar at the far end. The work of decoration was finished, and she stood alone, with her back toward him. At the slight rustling of his footsteps on the matting of the aisle she turned, but, seeing him, did not speak.

“I could hardly have found you in a more appropriate place,” he said, “since it is for the last time.”

Standing at the top of the three steps which

led up to the altar, she looked down at him, and her face was very grave. "Was it wise?" she asked. "Would it not have been better for you to go without—without this?"

"I have all the years for wisdom," he answered quietly, "and so I ask—this hour."

"Have you considered—me, in asking it?" she asked again.

He looked up at her, startled a little by the question. "I have wondered, but—shall I go?"

She shook her head and smiled. "Not yet, since I know you will go as—as you ought."

"Shall I?" He asked the question in a thoughtful way. "Sometimes in this last week I have come near fear—it is not a slight penalty."

She came down the steps and stood beside him, looking toward the altar. "But just," she said, "and because of its justice you will not fail. You will remember, and you will not fail."

"But I have doubted its justice," he urged. "There is so much that I could have done. To-day, up on the Castle Hill, I saw—my life has been a mass of broken ends, a useless, harmful thing—"

He repeated it, after a silence. "There is so much that I could have done . . ."

She turned toward him, laying her hand on his arm. "You will go—because I ask it, then, and I know you will come to see that it is just."

"We decided this a month ago," he answered; "there was no need to ask. I know—but just for to-day I can't see . . . I shall not see always, I find. There will be times when I must feel my way—and know . . ."

They stood silent for a time, and a ray of sunlight, falling from a stained side window of the church, moved imperceptibly toward them across the floor. A confusion of thoughts—things he had meant to say—crowded Sanderson's mind . . .

"You remember," he said at last hesitatingly—"that day when—I told you long ago, when we spoke of Esther's death—I had no beliefs?"

"Well?" she asked, recalling the day of which he spoke.

"I think—if it were possible to stay—beliefs would assert themselves again—I had them, once. Not that I think of staying because I said this, but this atmosphere, since you came back—it is regret, not resentment or weakening—I shall go."

"But it's not the atmosphere," she answered quickly. "It is events that are causing the change. You see—you make reparation now, and your own act reacts on you."

"How clearly you see! I had not looked at it in that way."

"But you see now—place makes no difference?"

"I see"—he moved away from her a pace—"I see you, to-day—I have all the years for sight of other things. An age of reasoning won't alter feeling, Constance. You know—you know why I would stay—you know—though I go I shall not forget again—Constance——"

She looked at him steadily, fearlessly. "I know," she answered, "and I, too, shall not forget. Had you remembered always—had you kept the promise you made to me—we two would not stand here as we stand now. And I accuse—since I shall not

see you again I can tell you—I accuse because I care. You have played with life, and brought a penalty on me as well as on yourself—of that I accuse you. Think, when you go to Elma, of what you have done—what you are and ought not to be to me. I would not have you forget, for I can't forget, nor cease to care."

He bent his head in answer to her accusation, but did not speak.

"Yet, since I shall not see you again," she said, and he looked up, hearing a new, wonderful note of tenderness in her voice—"I want you to remember—these last days of ours. We have been good friends, we two. Self-deceiving, perhaps, but good friends."

"I have seen, in these last days, all that I have lost," he answered, somewhat hoarsely.

She moved one step toward him, and the ray of sunlight from the window fell on her face. Sander-son dropped on one knee before her and grasped her hand.

"There is no need to tell you—you know," he said. "I want you to remember sometimes—I want you to pray for me. If ever a day should come to release me, I shall come back to you. And I go because of you—I shall not fail because of you."

He pressed her hand to his lips, and, rising—"God keep you, Constance," he said, and turned away.

From the far end of the aisle he looked back and saw her, kneeling before the altar, with her face hidden in her hands. The mote-flecked ray of

sunshine, falling on her, made a glory about her head, while, from a shadowed crucifix raised high on the altar before her, the pitying Christ looked down.

Having seen, Sanderson turned again and went out, walking unsteadily, by reason of blurred vision, into the warmth and light of the spring afternoon.

THE END OF THE FIFTH PHASE

THE LAST PHASE

CHAPTER XXIII

A DELAREY DECIDES

WITH a final deafening blast from her syren R.M.S.P. *Otranto* swung slowly round in Cherbourg harbour, and, following the big Nord-deutscher liner, *Kaiser Wilhelm III.*, by a half-hour, set out on the thirteen days' journey to Barbados. Sanderson stood aft, on the second-class deck, and, heedless of the bugle which called saloon passengers to dinner, looked out on the low hills which lie around the French port. The moon, three days past the full, hung over to westward, brightening as daylight failed, and water lapped along the liner's side in smooth, fair-weather ripples as she gathered way, though the long swell of the channel lifted and lowered the stern in regular, slow rhythm. Sanderson wondered, with some slight feeling of amusement at the thought, whether this boat carried his paint below her waterline.

Several passengers had come aboard at Cherbourg, but he had not seen any of them. He did not want the society of his fellows, just then, but to be alone and cease from all mental effort. In leaving England

he had made an end, and just now he wanted inertness—the quiet apathy which should follow such an end. His new beginning would come soon enough—let him have these days in which to vegetate, to shake off old influences—if that were possible—that he might give unrestricted play to the new when their time came.

But a steward came down the deck and spoilt his musings. “Dinner is served, sir, some time ago,” said the steward; and Sanderson, knowing that he would be hungry before morning if he were not hungry now, followed to the dining saloon. A Scotch geologist, who was going out in connection with the Trinidad oilfields, sat opposite him at table, and mingled remarks which indicated unbounded conceit with risky little anecdotes such as men of his class usually reserve for the smoking-room, and which, as an excuse for introducing them, he attributed to various great men whom (he said) he knew. His thin, piping voice was irritating in the last degree to one in Sanderson’s mental state, and the latter wished fervently that the geologist might turn seasick or choke himself with the food which he gorged in repulsive fashion. There were many empty seats at the table, for a number of passengers felt afraid, in spite of the calm weather, to risk a hurried departure for prosaic reasons from the saloon, and so remained in their cabins.

Sanderson went back to the second-class deck after dinner. Built originally for the Australian trade, the *Otranto* is provided with spacious second-class accommodation, but on this particular voyage there were but four passengers to occupy it, and, as

they spent their time at cards in the smoking-room, their promenade deck was utterly deserted—except for Sanderson. He stood alone by the stern, watching the swirling wake left by the screw, and the broad path of light laid from under the moon to the ship's side. Yet he saw other things as well : one walking steadily away from him on a wind-swept road, and turning on the crest of a rise to wave her hand in token of farewell ; or an altar, and that one who had waved to him kneeling before it in a ray of sunshine . . .

These things he would remember always, and no subsequent impressions could weaken the memories. Because of them he would go on, accomplish more than the spoilt life he left behind. Clear reasoning showed him that such a course was not difficult—he could care for Elma, guide her, though he could never again give such self-abandoning passion as in the months past. In the thought of the sunlit figure before the altar, praying for him, he should find his reward—intangible, fleeting, to be glimpsed only in hours like this, but he had earned it and no more. As the vision on the heath had told him, the act repaid itself.

Followed a question and a fear, almost akin to his questioning on that night of transition—had all his acts repaid themselves—should he escape thus easily ? Orme stared at him out from the past—he had judged and condemned Orme ; but had he, sinning equally, the right to condemn ? And if every act repaid itself, how should this repayment come about ? “ God do so to me, and more . . . ” Would the thought of Orme grow to a nightmare,

torturing him in every dream and oppressing him in every waking hour, or whence should adequate reprisal come ?

Westward, the moon drew down toward the sea, and beneath him the steering gear clanked intermittently. From forward of the boat three bells rang out—he had stood here for nearly two hours—realities asserted themselves. Orme—why think of Orme ? He had merited death, had died fittingly, and there could be no further reprisal—the thought of it was absurd, a phantom evolved by distorted fancy, and Sanderson thrust it aside. For all that was past he made reparation, in going to the woman who waited now, in Grenada.

With that thought came the sound of light, quick footfalls along the deck—he resented this intrusion on his solitude, and turned. To his utter amazement, Elma Steele stood before him, wrapped in a long, grey, fleecy cloak—for despite the season the night air was cold. Her eyes shone starlike as she faced him, and she smiled, the brilliant, tempting smile he knew.

“I began to fear that something had delayed you, and you had not come by this boat,” she said. “I have searched everywhere for you—and now I find you !”

“But you went—a fortnight ago,” he answered. “I thought you in Grenada, now.”

“I left that boat at Cherbourg, where I joined this,” she explained. “I went to Mont Louis in Touraine, our home—the home of my people. I knew my father would be glad to hear that I had gone there.”

“So you spent the fortnight with your people?” he asked, to gain time. She had come upon him so suddenly, and fitted so little with his reflective, inert mood—he wanted time to realise that his new life must begin, not a fortnight hence, but now.

She shook her head. “With their ghosts, for only their ghosts are left,” she said. “It was that I might see the place, and tell my father of it. I stayed at the village near Mont Louis, but all that remains of my people in Touraine is a ruined château on a hillside, and some stories that old people tell. How should a Delarey escape the guillotine in the days of the Terror? Of the king, they died like the king—it is an old tale.”

“But your father, and you?” Sanderson asked again.

“My father’s grandfather was a little boy, and he escaped with some refugees—not of our own house. He went to Grenada when this France of the *canaille* ruled there. My father has never seen—he will be glad when I tell him.”

Standing, as she told of her people, with her little dark head thrown back proudly, she justified the name she claimed. It was a regal pose—yet the blood of a more tropic race than that which bred Delareys flowed in her veins, a slight admixture, but sufficient to give her a passionate intensity of greater degree, even, than her pride.

“Pride of race,” Sanderson thought aloud. “I wonder where you would be now, Elma, if that revolution had not been? A *grande dame* or *demoiselle* of Touraine, perhaps.”

"Perhaps. Yet"—she bent forward, smiling—"this is better, for I should not be with you."

"True. I wonder—is that so much to you?" He spoke reflectively, as if he would know the depth of the passion which lit her eyes. No answering light showed in his own, but he evinced rather a cool, quiet attempt at assessment of her as, splendidly appealing, she leaned toward him.

"All!" she said. "And you—is it still so little to you that you will not forget—will you never waken and come back to the place I keep for you? My dear—my dear—I have waited weeks that were like years, down by the sea at Hythe and away in Touraine, and all the time I dreamed of the life to come with you, and with no bar between!" She came nearer and laid her hands on his shoulders. "Is it nothing to you—what am I to you, now?"

"Hush, dear!" Touched by the note of appeal in her voice, he drew her close to him, and, reaching up, caressed her hair. "Why should you ask such questions, when I have nothing left but you?"

"I am afraid—it seems that the man I knew in you has gone, and I am afraid he will not come back," she answered wistfully. Then she drew his face down toward hers and looked closely into his eyes, as if she would search for the motive which impelled such words as he had just spoken.

"There is something I must tell you"—she drew back from his clasp and went to the rail, looking out toward the setting of the moon—"before we begin together. I want you to know of the night before—before he died."

Sanderson knew to whom she referred. "That was—after you left me in London," he asserted.

"Yes." She answered without looking toward him. "I tell it now because—because I know that some day I must tell it. And remember, I would have kept it from you, but I cannot, always. So——"

She hesitated, looking out along the track of silver across the sea to where the moon was dropping over the world's edge. Sanderson moved nearer to her. "Well, Elma?" he asked gently.

"He knew, that night," she said, without turning toward him. "He went to the hotel after I had gone, and——"

But Sanderson started back with a gasping cry—the knowledge was like a blow between the eyes to him. She turned toward him in a frightened, hurried way, and saw that he stood with hand upraised, as if to ward off a second blow. He had never anticipated such a possibility, and now he saw Steele's death in a new light.

"He—knew?" he echoed incredulously.

She bent her head in silent assent. From forward of the boat four bells sounded, and Sanderson leaned back, limp and nerveless after shock, against the rail.

"Then—I suppose—I am responsible—for his death." He enunciated the words in queer little jerks.

"No!" she cried, for she had feared that result from her confession. "Not that—nothing could have averted it—he knew himself doomed, months before. Not that—Jack—you don't think it?"

She bent toward him, reaching out her hands in an appeal to him to withdraw the words, for she heard in them a sentence on herself.

"Perhaps not—I don't——" The words had a hopeless sound, and he rubbed his forehead like one who is weary of many perplexities. "I planned to make right of a wrong, and now this—it's such a tangle——"

He broke off without ending the sentence and stood away from the rail, looking forward along the deck. Beside him Elma, too, stood erect and cold—one thing that he said had completed a thought which had had its beginning on the day when she had bidden him good-bye at Rockford, that day when Constance had stopped the car beside them on the road.

"You planned to make right of a wrong?" she asked, and all the pride of the house from which she claimed descent rang in the question.

"Was it not a wrong?" he asked in reply, not yet understanding.

"Did that pale Constance cause you to see the wrong?" she said bitterly. "Was it for this—for repentance that you came back to me, you man I loved? Do you think *I* will repent in a way that kills love—I, a Delarey, give life for a shadow?"

"Elma"—he held out his hands toward her, fearing lasting effect from the passionate, bitter scorn her words revealed—"stop—for God's sake stop! I have come to you—don't misunderstand and make my coming useless! I ask nothing but to go on with you."

Had there been time for thought, he might well have chosen other words to answer her. At these she laughed—such a laugh, perhaps, as that with which her ancestors faced the mob which killed them, but could not kill their spirit, in the days of the Terror. “Misunderstand?” she echoed. “No, for I understand, now. You would come to me to right a wrong, and I—I have loved you as I thought you loved me, given all, for all time—think you that right or wrong count in such a love, or that I should grow cold for one hour—for one second toward you? Yet not to you, but to the man I knew and held—was glad to hold, mine! I will not take the half-man—I would not have *you*, a shadow, come—better memory than that bitterness! *You* are not the man to whom I gave myself last year, and I will have no less, no other—go back to your pale Constance, ask her what John Orme was to her, and I will go on alone!”

From the swift current of her words, shattering in its effect, that reference to Orme struck out and startled him. Before he could find an answer she went forward, a stately, proud figure sweeping on—not Elma Steele, but Imelda Delarey.

He stood alone while the moon dropped from sight, half stunned by this wreck at the outset of his new life—for he felt that she would not retract such words as these she had spoken. His purpose of reparation was broken, he stood alone and un-assoiled—and afraid.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DREAM BECOMES TRUTH

IT would be hard to say which of these two individuals, now so curiously placed with regard to each other, felt more resentment at the knowledge that they were cooped together for thirteen days. Though both were careful to avoid unnecessary meetings, it was impossible, in the confined space which a six-thousand-ton liner affords its saloon passengers, for these two to escape each other altogether.

Sanderson had his deck-chair taken down to the stern, and day after day he sat there with books which he did not read, brooding over his frustrated purpose and the alternative of return which remained to him—useless, undesired return. His fellow-passengers, after some vain attempts to induce him to take part in the ship's sports and other amusements, entitled him "the disagreeable man," and left him alone.

Meanwhile Elma paced the leeward promenade deck amidships for hours daily, while the other passengers admired her beauty, wondered at her restlessness, and, after three or four days, resented her evident distaste for their society. There were

shadows under her eyes, by the time the *Otranto* got down to the latitude of the Azores, which told of sleepless nights as well as restless days.

In spite of care on both sides, they met a dozen times a day. In corridors and on staircases, and in the saloon at meal-hours, they would meet and pass with low-murmured, indistinguishable words of greeting from one or other; with hurried glances on Sanderson's part, and steady, cool regard, pride-sustained, on Elma's; and with, on each side, the unspoken accusation that this added cause for constraint might have been avoided, had the other been more careful. Elma's last words on the night of her confession forbade her to make any advance toward conciliation; Sanderson, in whose mind those words rankled, remembered also that Steele had died with the knowledge of their guilt; and so ten days passed.

For her part, Elma, passionate and impetuous, was held back from retraction of her sudden decision by the pride which forced it, and by that alone, since her restlessness and desire for solitude—which, since Sanderson had the only quiet spot on deck, she could not get outside her cabin—increased, as did the distance between her and England. And toward the end of the time she would pause, often, from her monotonous walking up and down the promenade deck to look aft—she looked for Sanderson to come and seek forgiveness. A woman always puts it that way.

On the tenth day, he came. At mid-afternoon, when nearly all the passengers had gone to the windward side of the boat to get the benefit of what

breeze was available, Elma stood beside the rail, looking aft, when he came round by the engine-room and walked toward her, steadily. The change in her—it was the first time in those ten days that he had mustered courage to regard her closely—shocked him, for her face had grown thin and somewhat pained-looking, and there were hollows under her eyes from lack of sleep. She looked tired, older, he thought—he tried to speak as easily as if these ten days had not been, but he failed.

“Why, you’re ill!” he said. “What is it, Elma?”

“Nothing,” she answered quietly, stepping back from the rail. One may surmise that, having expected other words, she summoned pride to aid her in answering these.

“I came to ask you to forget—the other night,” he went on, with less constraint and more feeling. “I can’t go back—I have no wish but to go on with you. Will you forget it?”

She faced him and answered with another question, speaking deliberately, coldly—he had not asked for the forgiveness which, with a woman’s unreason, she saw as due from her—“Tell me truth—is it because you care that you ask?”

She knew the truth, but had he lied she would have accepted it—she longed for him to lie, and the passion which her pride held in check cried out for his surrender, not for truth, for a woman who loves as she loved can always deceive herself. But Sanderson did not know, and regarding this one thing he could not have lied, even if he had known.

"I ask you to forget, Elma, as I will forget, and to let me care for you. I cannot go back, and I have nothing left but you, now."

Had he held back the last word that he spoke, he would have won that which he asked, but the one word brought her to her full height, and she smiled, such a smile as had curved her lips on the first night of the voyage, when she had first condemned him.

"It is the half-man who speaks," she said, with quiet contempt. "Go back—to Constance Gray."

For a minute he faced her as if he would have said more ; then, biting at his lips, he turned and went back to his place on the afterdeck. She watched his going—once she started forward as if to call him back, and once she half lifted her hands as if to reach out toward him—pride and desire fought within her, and pride won. When Sanderson had passed beyond the engine-room, she turned away and went to her cabin, and that evening she did not go down to dinner.

The night before they reached Barbados, she went to him on the afterdeck. "I have come to bid you good-bye," she said, "and to bring you these." She held out two tiny objects for him to take. "I forget how they came into my possession, but they are yours, I believe. By to-morrow I shall have forgotten that I ever saw them."

He took them—two empty cartridge shells such as are used with an automatic pistol. Sight of them recalled the day after Orme's death, and the

wonderful woman who, radiantly, irresistibly tempting, had lain in his arms then, in token of surrender to him and his will—though by that surrender she conquered him. That woman, all to him then, stood before him now, he knew—there was no change save the dominance of pride, beneath which was love, strong and impetuous as in that day of surrender.

“Elma,” he said pleadingly, “won’t you——”

“I came to bid good-bye,” she interrupted. “I shall go on from Barbados alone.” She tried to speak carelessly, but the mighty effort which the pose cost her made her voice tremble a little—yet Sanderson heard decision in the words.

“Then—good-bye, Elma,” he said, holding out his hand.

She clasped the outstretched hand and released it, then hesitated for a few seconds in which the future hung balancing. Almost had desire defeated her pride—it needed but one word more of pleading, one sign or movement from him, and her self-control would have failed. But that, the last chance, passed.

“Good-bye,” she said, and left him.

He leaned over the rail and dropped the two cartridge cases into the swirl of water caused by the screw. “I have done my best,” he said.

In the darkness of lost purpose which he faced was this one spark of light—he had done his best to carry out his reparation. No matter what he had done in the time preceding this voyage, no matter how great the sense of his guilt in that time, conscience acquitted him here, for he had spared no effort that promised result—Elma had

decided her future, and from the burden of this choice he stood clear.

Wakening in the morning after a night of troubled dreams, Sanderson heard a gentle lapping sound in place of the steady wash against the ship's side, and there came too, through the opened porthole, unfamiliar cries. He realised an odd absence of vibration, and, understanding that the screw had stopped, he looked out through the porthole and saw little boats, manned by negroes and by half-castes of every shade, lying near the ship's side. He saw no land, for his cabin was on the seaward side until the tide should swing the boat round on her anchor. He dressed and went on deck, where he saw Bridgetown harbour, the white buildings of the town encircling it, and, beyond, a land sloping gently upward for miles—half the island lay in view, and all the slope was clothed in the wonderful green of a well-watered tropical country. Running out to the end of the silver-edged promontory, on which stands Bridgetown lighthouse, he saw a mass of splendid foliage, from which the great fan-leaves of many palms projected, standing out against the blue of sea beyond. After days of the monotonous alternation of sea with sky, he saw Barbados as a garden land, a very Eden of tropic splendour.

Then, standing to watch with consciousness of the beauty in that which he saw, he lost thought of it at seeing Elma, who crossed from the saloon entrance to the companion ladder, at the foot of which a boat waited. Sanderson went to the ship's side and looked down.

The boatman spoke to his fellow. "It's Missy Imelda!" he cried delightedly. "Missy Imelda Del'rey come back, sure!" Sanderson recalled how, away back on the Castle Hill at Brayley, she had told of her father's letters, in which he said that she was not forgotten in Grenada. And even here, Sanderson thought with curious pride in having known her, they remembered her.

She stepped into the boat and was rowed to another steamer which, smaller than the *Otranto*, lay at anchor farther inshore. Sanderson watched while she went up the side—watched long after she had gone, knowing now that she had passed out from his life.

Yet there remained one way by which he might follow even now. Were he to go over to that other boat, she asked but one lie of him—one lifelong lie. He knew that if he spoke it he could not live it.

The chief officer came along the deck. "There's the inter-island boat, sir," he said, indicating the steamer to which Elma had gone. "You're for Grenada, I think—the tender will be alongside here at ten o'clock to take you across, or you can get one of these rowing boats to ferry you over now, if you like."

"I'm not going," Sanderson answered abruptly. "What's the quickest way home again?"

The chief officer looked somewhat surprised—he was a courteous, genial soul, and Sanderson had been an enigma to him throughout the voyage. "Quickest way?" he repeated. "You'll get home quickest by going on with us to Trinidad and catching the Dutch boat up to New York. The

purser will see about altering your ticket, if you really mean it."

"Thanks—I do mean it. What time do we leave here?"

"Well, there's a tremendous amount of cargo for transhipment and landing, but we'll get out by seven, if we're lucky," and the chief officer passed on to attend to his many duties.

That night, when the lights of Bridgetown had begun to reflect from the water, and an offshore wind blew tropic perfume seaward, the inter-island boat swung round to commence her voyage to Grenada. She came round slowly, and passed by the *Otranto* at hardly twenty yards' distance—then was it that Sanderson saw Elma for the last time. She stood, almost beneath a cluster of lights, on the promenade deck of the inter-island boat, graceful, wonderfully beautiful, a splendid, slender figure standing quite alone. Seeing him, she waved her hand and called, and the words came musical and clear across the little space between—

"Remember Elgin—I want no less than I knew then. My dream comes true!"

Sanderson reached out his hands as if to beckon her back to him, and again she called—"Farewell!" Then, gathering way every second, the boat which bore her passed on into the scented darkness, and he saw her no more.

"Remember Elgin"—yes, he remembered Elgin now. "If ever that day should come, there will be no more life for me—only existence and memory of the hours with you." Clapsed in his arms as they sat together in the cathedral tower,

she had whispered the words to him—and now the day had come, the long arm of coincidence had brought her dream to pass. She had gone to existence—knowing her, he knew that the woman who had nestled in his arms at Elgin recalled that day now. Behind her pride, love flamed passionate and strong as in the days of splendid guilt, and, its object self-denied, would burn on and on, tropic and intense. The thought of her, as he had known her at Elgin, stayed with him—*that* woman went on to her island home, bearing with her the torture of her love, passionate and for all life henceforth unsatisfied.

The *Otranto* went out into the land-breeze-scented darkness and away to open sea. Far to northward of her the lights of the inter-island boat shone, with lessening brilliance as the two ships' courses diverged; and at last only a speck of light remained, marking out each ship to the other for such of their passengers as chose to watch the horizon. While a glimmer remained in sight from the *Otranto's* deck, Sanderson stood watching by the rail, self-accusing, tortured by many memories of the woman he would see no more. He knew that, from the deck of the ship which bore her, she also watched while any sign remained of the boat which took him out from her life—was she standing erect and clear-eyed, or did she, perhaps, strive to see the glimmering of light southward through tear-mists?

And now the solitary light was only a speck as the *Otranto* rose on a swell—now it had vanished altogether, and he turned away.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE STORM

FULL realisation of the fact that Elma had passed utterly out from his life came slowly to Sanderson. He had accustomed himself to the thought that such years as were left to him would be spent with her, and it was difficult, now, to commence the establishing of a new set of rules by which to live. For in planning to follow her to Grenada he had schooled desire, for the first time in his life. Desire reasserted itself slowly — and fearfully.

Desire had played such a destructive part in his life, giving nothing in return for that which it had taken away. Now, his thoughts regarding the future and its possibilities thrust out in the same way that a snail projects the wonderful eye-bearing feelers with which it is provided, a way which denoted fear of collision with some repellent and perhaps dangerous substance. So much harm had he wrought by one act and the subsequent course of action which it forced on him, that he was fearful of beginning again. To say that he would keep within law was easy, but there were so many laws unwritten, and clearly discernible only through their penalties.

One may say that the complete realisation—the perfecting of the process of mental evolution to which he was subjected—was denied him, for in its final stage that process was superseded by an absolute reaction, a sudden, dazzling change, inexplicable as unaccountable. He wakened one morning toward the end of his homeward voyage to find a new heaven and a new earth—in some mysterious fashion the dead past buried its dead, and left him with the sight of a new life, unstained and clear, lying before him. There remained no one thing that he did not desire to mar his future, no one result of the things he had done was left to shadow him—the world was his again. He stood and looked forward, a man born into light after an arctic night of darkness, perceiving cause in his being and aim in the days to come ; a man, seeing, where a fearful being had groped ; one of purpose and strong to achieve, where one had shrunk from facing the future as self-unfitted to take part in the scheme of things. He stood assertive, claiming the place which this new birth revealed as waiting his coming, confident that, since all that was past was wiped away from the sight of man, it would trouble him no more, and seeing again, though less clearly than at manhood's first beginning, the splendid visions of unstained youth.

Before the altar at Brayley he had left one who shared those visions, one who, through the instinct which is stronger than any other guide, had known that this man slept in him—one who would greet the awakened man gladly, and welcome him back. Elma—his conscience acquitted him of her, and he

could look into Constance Gray's eyes and tell her that he had done his part, and tried to carry out the plan of reparation. That the plan was doomed to failure from the outset, he saw now ; in constant contact with Elma's temperament, himself uninfluenced by the passion which swayed her, he must have failed soon or late. Since he had attempted the impossible, it was well that the severance had come so soon, and now——

I stand back from this phase in the moulding of a man, knowing its inevitableness, but offering no explanation for the cause of its occurrence at such a point. I stand seeing this new man, understanding vaguely and with awe the working of God, or of Nature, or of the Process of Evolution—call it what you will, coin any *alias* you choose, for it is the Power which guides and shapes humanity—who brought this thing to pass, and fashioned, out of one blinded and crippled by the result of his own weakness, a man—who opened up to him, after his perplexed groping in blinding mists, a whole new world of promise and purpose.

He came to Brayley early in a summer afternoon, and set out in sunlit stillness on the road which led to Rockford House. The hawthorn hedges on each side of the road were dulled with dust, and dust-laden were the leaves of the elms where Constance had left him, back in that other life of shadows and broken purpose. Away north-westward, beyond the fertile, far-reaching valley he had thought never to see again, a black cloud gathered slowly into the blue of sky—he saw it, but did not heed it. For

what man heeds the coming of a summer storm, when he knows that an hour will give him of life's best ?

This Sanderson knew, as he walked, and no doubt nor fear troubled him. There was nothing of the past to tell her, except the reason for his return ; seeing and understanding that, himself, he knew that she also would see and understand. He went with certainty of purpose, with definite belief in himself and in his right to go, and with the knowledge which had been his since he left Constance kneeling before the altar—the knowledge that her heart had called him to stay, though the sense of duty had caused her to acquiesce in his going.

He reached the corner of the meadow which slopes away from the gardens at Rockford House, and at the opposite side of the meadow he saw her, walking alone—it seemed fitting to him that, robed in black when he had left her, she should wear white now. Rather than go round and through the gardens, he leaped the low hedge which separated this corner of the meadow from the road, and went straight toward her across the slope. Before he had covered half the intervening distance she saw him, and stood motionless, waiting his coming.

Then he stood before her, and it was the new, strong man who faced her, not that one who, groping on an uncertain way, had gone from before the altar in Brayley church.

“ But how—how has it come about ? ” she asked, understanding that which had come to pass, but not its cause.

What words he used in answering, she could not recollect, after. She knew that he told the story of

the outward voyage, of how Elma had gone on alone, and of how, after the period of utter darkness which followed her going, he had come to perception of the unshadowed future which a fate stronger than himself had given him. She knew that he talked as he had never talked before—here was the man she had glimpsed vaguely in the first days, before Elma tempted him and made the man to whom she had bidden farewell.

And after, while the storm-cloud in the north-west grew and shaped to its destined purpose, she knew that they talked together of the future—their future. It was definite, accepted—there was no need for question or answer on either side. Here was the man of her dreams, the ideal she had made in the months of silence, who, long beaten down and submerged in muddled results of his own sin, had at last risen clean and strong to make a new beginning with her. If the stress of practical life and of sordid, everyday realities should cloud some hours of their future, she would still know beyond question that her ideal existed—under human imperfections was true manhood, brought to light by error and the perception of error.

They could not walk always on this high plane, she knew—humanity's limitations forbade it—but often they could step up to it, together. Together! The consciousness of all that word implied brought them half-way down from the high, rare atmosphere in which they had stood, in which a caress would have been a shock, or a word of endearment discordant. At that consciousness Sanderson hesitated, and Constance stood with eyes downcast—their personal, human relation, hitherto unconsidered,

became suddenly clamorous for expression to each other, though each understood. Sanderson reached out and clasped her hand.

"Constance . . . dear?" he said simply. And looking up, she answered with her eyes in fuller measure than that of words.

They walked on, silent for a time, and paused again. Then was it that he remembered one question which had perplexed him since the night when Elma learned the reason through which he came to her. He told again, as nearly as he could recall that night, of Elma and the bitterness with which she had left him.

"And there was one question she bade me ask you—I ask it now because it puzzled me—I couldn't understand. It was this—what was John Orme, to you?"

She looked up as if the question surprised her. "A long while ago, she asked me not to mention John Orme to you," she said, "but I meant to tell you—I began to tell you that day when we stood by the gate, and the vicar interrupted me. John Orme was John Orme Gray, my brother."

The cloud from the north-west covered more than half the sky, now, and in between periods of intense, waiting stillness came mutterings of thunder. Through two of these periods Sanderson stood still before John Orme's sister, and all colour receded from his face, leaving it grey and pinched looking and old, while he stared, a lifeless, frozen stare. There was that about him which forbade her to question—such a separateness from other men as must have marked out Cain, after the seal

was set on him. And he, feeling on himself the seal that was set on Cain, spoke Cain's words—

“ My punishment is greater than I can bear.”

The words Constance heard and understood, but the voice, that of one who faces a vengeance too great for fear, too terrible to admit of shrinking, was like no voice she had ever heard.

And then she knew—in the swift realisation of causes which comes to aid the mind in life's awful crises, she knew that which Elma alone had known, knew of the tragedy behind Esther's death, and knew how terrible a vengeance Elma had taken on him in bidding him ask this question. Suddenly he stepped forward, walking blindly and without sense of direction, and passed her—his body was an automaton driving on unguided and without the mental consciousness of movement, for the soul within it had been raised to a height of almost measureless splendour, and had fallen thence to self-created hell.

At the breaking of the storm, sudden and unreasoning terror fell on Constance; there were leering faces in the boles of trees about her, gaping mouths in the grass, whisperings of dire import in the falling rain—inanimate nature suddenly became animate and horrible, and like a frightened child she ran up the slope toward home. From the little gate which gives access to the gardens she cast a fleeting glance at Sanderson, who stood beneath a tree in the meadow, sheltered from the rain which now fell fast, and looking upward, reaching upward with his hands toward the sky. This she saw, and then she ran on along the garden path; as she gained the house there came a blaze and a roar, and

it seemed to her that the world was shaking—with the coming of the terrible knowledge which was hers had come the end of all things. She was not a woman, for the time, but a pain and a fear, for here was a thing before which normal, controlled emotions receded, leaving awe and agony—a thing in presence of which the two on whom it struck could not aid each other, could not face each other, but must face *it*, each one alone.

THE QUIET END

They found him at the day's quiet end, when the storm had passed. They called to him, but he did not answer, for One other had called him, and he could never answer to man's calling again.

Looking at his face after they had brought him into the house, Constance knew that he had come to understanding at the last—understanding, even, of the reason by which the knowledge, which caused this unlooked-for catastrophe, so long had been withheld by the power which shaped him.

She knows, too, through an instinct which is so strong as to defy reason, that away beyond reach of every temptation which beset him here, beyond the littleness of mistaken reprisal with which he would have cancelled sin, he waits to tell her of the vision given him at that last hour's end. This she learned in looking at his face, after they had brought him from beneath the lightning-stricken tree. They told her that they had found him lying face downward, with his head resting on his curved right arm.

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